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ROBERT ORD'S ATONEMENT.



ROBERT ORD'S ATONEMENT.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"NELLIE'S MEMORIES," "BARBARA HEATHCOTE'S TRIAL,"
"WEE WIFIE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON:

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ROBERT ORD'S ATONEMENT.

CHAPTER I.

"DON'T GO, GARTON; I WANT YOU."

"Silence!" he exclaimed,
"A woman's pity sometimes makes her mad—
A man's distraction must not cheat his soul
To take advantage of it. Yet 'tis hard.
Farewell. * * * *

* * * * * * * *

AURORA LEIGH.

ROTHA had quite made up her mind what to do.

As soon as Reuben had gone, she went to the window and took a calm survey of the weather outside. The prospect was not very promising. The damp drizzle had ceased, but a grey sea fog was creeping over the sands. A raw mistiness pervaded everything; it was scarcely an evening for an invalid to stir abroad. Nevertheless Rotha felt no doubt of the prudence of her undertaking.

She communicated her intention to Mrs. Carruthers with admirable sang froid. She only shrugged her shoulders with pretty petulance at that excellent woman's dismay. Meg's remonstrances fell on deaf ears.

"When one has a duty to perform, one must fulfil it at all risks," she repeated with a little dignity. She nodded at Meg with wide-open anxious eyes. Two bright spots of colour were in her cheeks. There was repressed impatience in her every movement. She scarcely listened when Meg pleaded a sick headache as an excuse for not accompanying her.

"You had better go to bed early," Rotha said to her. "You ought to speak to some doctor about these headaches." She was not indifferent to her friend's sufferings; she was simply self-absorbed. She sat in a fever of excitement while Meg placidly sipped her tea, an intolerable mixture of pain and pity filled her heart to overflowing. "What is the good of making friends if one must lose them?" she thought.

Meg, on her part, was sorely bewildered by the girl's impatience and wilfulness. A dim suspicion of the cause kept her in sympathizing silence. She sat with throbbing head while Rotha roamed hither and thither in her grey dress. "It must come to her as it must come to all of us," she thought, and a pitiful feeling came over her as she remembered her own miserable past, a longing to take the girl in her arms and shelter her from all possible trouble and disappointment. She was a little indignant at the way things had gone. "She has seen no one else, and she does



not know her own heart," thought Meg, sadly. The young man's peculiarities repelled and annoyed her. In common with many other people she was inclined to undervalue Garton Ord.

Meg, in her wise experience, thought that she saw how Rotha's possible future was shaping itself, and was rather inclined to be angry at the sorry result. Beggars were not to Mrs. Carruthers' taste; it did not suffice to her that Rotha had enough for both. She thought Rotha, with her sweetness and cleverness, might marry any one. The young people's pretence at friendship did not blind her in the least. "They will go on talking and laughing till they find they are necessary to each other, and then one or other of them will wake up." She did not know that the waking had already come to poor Garton, and that he was finding it very bitter. She was thinking rather of Rotha's restlessness these three days, of her unusual pettishness and caprice. Rotha's wide open eyes, shining with impatience, her glowing cheeks and hot hands were so many signs to the watchful woman of the reality and truth of her surmises.

Rotha, on her side, knew nothing of her friend's suspicions. She was a little chagrined at her scant sympathy, that was all. She went up and kissed her, almost penitently, before she left the house.

"Be sure you go to bed before I return,"

she said, with some remorse. "I would rather have the headache than the heartache," she thought, as she struggled through the damp fog.

She went to her usual seat behind the pillar and knelt down for a long time. It could hardly be said that she prayed, for her prayer was in some such fashion as follows, for she said over and over again, only in different words—

"If Garton Ord refuses to take my advice, what shall I do? and if he refuses to accept my help what shall I do? And then he is my friend, my very own friend, and I cannot let him go away," and once—"God forbid," very energetically. I do not know whether Rotha added an "Amen" to these clauses, but it certainly struck her with some degree of shame that there had not been much reverence in her petitions. She sat and looked towards the chancel very humbly at this point of her reflections.

"I ought not to have been here to-night," she said with a sigh at her own shortcomings, "I am as bad as those who bought merchandize or sold doves." And as these salutary thoughts prevailed, she chose the longest hymn she could find in her book, and read it three times over without taking in a word of its sense. And why? Merely because a tall dark figure had brushed past her as it went down the aisle to the vestry, and she had looked up and seen

Garton Ord's face, looking sad and pale, and worn, as she had never seen it before.

And after that it was all no use.

Rotha stood up in her place or knelt: she listened attentively: she sang with her usual heartiness, but the strain on her mind was terrible. She could not keep her attention from wandering—chill doubts haunted her; she was afraid of herself and him; was she right in seeking a confidence which had been withheld from her? And then the remembrance of the poor boy's worn face drove all hesitation from her mind, and after that she had a strange fancy.

They were singing that beautiful hymn "Thy will be done." Rotha was singing it too with tears in her eyes. She was looking at the altar and the lilies; the dim white globes seemed blossoming from the frescoes; the tall painted windows were full of blurred outline and shadow. Reuben was crying quietly behind his back.

"If Thou shalt call me to resign
What most I prize—it ne'er was mine"—

Was it fancy, or did Garton suddenly look towards the dark corner where Rotha was singing? But when she turned her head again he was standing with his face to the lilies, and his lips pressed tightly together as though in pain.

Rotha heard a sigh behind her, which she

knew came from Mary. She was quite aware that Mrs. Ord had come in late, and was sitting a little to her left ; but when service was over she did not once turn her head. She sat in her place steadily, while Mary stood up and fidgeted with her wraps. By-and-by she had an instinct that her friend was waiting for her in the porch, but she took no heed. Mrs. Ord was not quite easy in her mind as she went down the churchyard alone. She remembered Rotha's petulance and soreness of the previous evening, and was a little exercised in her mind in consequence.

Rotha sat still and waited, not very patiently it must be owned. She saw Garton go into the chancel with the wrappers for the altar, and a moment afterwards Reuben followed him. He was giving him her message. She could see him start and turn quickly to the boy. He seemed hesitating, but it was full three minutes before Reuben was dismissed with an assenting word. Reuben came down and stood beside Rotha for a little while in her dark corner.

“ Wasn’t it a beautiful hymn ?” he whispered, “ he was angry with me because I couldn’t sing it. He sang every bit, down to the last verse, and then he broke down himself.”

“ We ought not to think of our own worries in church,” said Rotha, dogmatically. She was a little pale and cold sitting in that dark

corner. Her conscience misgave her as she thought of the strange merchandize she had brought in that evening. The sellers of doves were nothing to her. She was every bit as bad as Reuben. Reuben answered her very prettily.

"If we don't bring our burdens, how are we to lay them down? that is what his Reverence says. How can I help being sorry for him, loving him so dearly as I do, and seeing him so unhappy. Oh, Miss Maturin, he looks so bad, almost as though he were going to be ill."

"There, that will do," said Rotha. She pushed the boy from her with hot, feverish hands, though she was so cold.

Something shining fell on Reuben's sleeve at that moment.

"You must hurry home. Mrs. Summerson does not like you to be late," she said, as she rose hastily. Her gown blew about her feet as she went out into the porch. The sea fog had cleared off, and one or two stars trembled above the blackness. The wind was blowing the sand up among the graves. The white crosses and tombstones gleamed in the dim haze. Rotha coughed and drew her cloak round her as she drew back into the church, nearly stumbling over some one as she did so.

"I beg your pardon," said Garton, with a nervous laugh; "I thought you heard me, but I suppose the wind was too boisterous."

Rotha scarcely answered as he put open the door for her. The little surprise had agitated her ; she went on, leaving Garton to follow ; she scarcely took any notice when the young man came up with her, panting and breathless ; in reality a new sort of shyness kept her lips closed.

"I had to lock up the church," he said. "Had you forgotten that when you walked so fast ? I hardly thought I should have overtaken you before you reached Bryn."

"I forgot about the keys," returned Rotha, apologetically ; "one cannot help hurrying in such a wind."

"It was not fit for you to have come to church," he replied, decidedly. "Mary has told us what a cold you have. You were coughing dreadfully through the service."

"It was nothing," returned Rotha, indifferently. The mention of her cold reminded her of the old soreness. He knew of her indisposition, then, and had never cared to inquire after her. When it pleased him he could come three or four times in the course of one day, but now this sad trouble of his was turning even him against her. She held herself aloof as this thought crossed her ; her voice went out to him rather tremulously in the darkness.

"I thought you had forgotten me. You have all been too busy these three days to think much of any one but yourselves," exclaimed the girl,

in a hurt voice. "Mrs. Ord came to me, and was dreadfully mysterious. I suppose I was foolish to mind it. Of course I have no right to be considered."

"You have every right, you mean, Miss Maturin. Why should you say such a thing?" Garton spoke vehemently, but his tone was hardly as steady as usual.

"I suppose Mrs. Ord was told not to confide in me," continued Rotha, plaintively. "When Reuben came in this afternoon he burst out crying, and told me everything. I liked Reuben's red eyes better than Mrs. Ord's mystery."

"I told Mary to say nothing about it," continued Gar. "I wished—that is, I thought it better—"

But Rotha broke in upon his stammering—

"You thought it better that I should not know. Why did you not give Reuben your orders too? Mary and the Vicar tell the little Sister everything. Perhaps you would rather not come in to-night, Mr. Garton? Meg is not very well. I suppose you meant to have come and wished me good-bye before you sailed?"

Rotha quickened her steps, with secret exasperation and impatience. Her voice trembled as she delivered herself of this cutting speech; tears sprang to her eyes in the darkness.

"May I not come in? Why are you so angry with me to-night?" asked Garton, humbly.

The poor fellow knew nothing about women ; he could not understand the girl's soreness and hurt feelings. He followed her up the gravel path with his head drooping ; he was utterly dejected and miserable. Rotha gave a little stamp with her foot as she choked back her tears. Her checks were burning again.

"He does not care for me ; nobody cares for me," she thought.

She went straight into the parlour and laid aside her hat. She refused Garton's help rather impatiently when he wanted to divest her of her damp cloak. She hated herself for her pettishness all the time, but she could not help it.

As for Garton, he had betaken himself to the fireside after his repulse. He held on to the mantelpiece tightly as he looked down into the red gleaming coals, his head resting on his arm. He did not alter his attitude nor move when Rotha swept past him rather impetuously in her grey dress, though he started slightly on hearing himself addressed.

"Will you not sit down?" she said, still more impatiently, as though goaded on by his dejection. "Three days ago I don't think you needed to be invited to take a seat."

He lifted his head from the mantelpiece at this.

"Why do you say such things to me?" he

said, almost fiercely ; then, dropping his voice, very sadly, " You must not—I cannot bear it."

Rotha was electrified by the sudden change of manner ; her colour rose, and she said more gently—

" I am afraid I was cross. I did not mean to be, but one cannot help being vexed by such seeming unkindness."

" What unkindness ? I don't understand you. Do you mean that any of us have treated you badly ?" he demanded, so vehemently that Rotha was frightened. " Pshaw ! what a fool I am ; as though Robert's persecution were not enough to turn you against us."

" I did not mean that," returned Rotha, quite shocked. " Hush ! what nonsense. Haven't I forgiven him ? Do I not forgive him every day of my life ? Mr. Garton, you ought to know me better than that."

" Well, what then ?" replied Garton, gloomily. " Do we know any one ? Are we sure even of ourselves ? If you mean that I have acted unkindly in keeping all this miserable business a few hours from you, and in making Mary hold her tongue about it, you have a very poor idea of my motives in doing so."

" I confess I was hurt. I thought we were such friends," returned Rotha, in a voice that was perilously sweet. Had she any idea how she was torturing him ? He had drawn his chair

to the fire, and was bending over it, with his arms propped heavily against his knees ; his forehead was puckered up with pain. As he spoke he scarcely raised his eyes above the grey hem of her dress. Was there a glamour before his sight ? But as she sat there in the radius of the fire-light, an ineffable majesty seemed to surround the young girl. Her youth and sweetness abashed him. He had always seen beauties in her which no one else had seen, and now a sickness and impotence of longing seized upon him when he remembered that all this beauty and grace was not for him.

As he sat there with his moody glance bent on the fire, he knew every trick of her countenance, every fold of her dress and wave of her hair. In the long, dreary years that were to follow, how he would remember this evening, when he listened to her innocent reproaches, with the wind soughing among the garden trees, and the dull lapping of the distant waves on the shore.

" I thought we were such friends," repeated Rothera, softly. " Why did you not come and tell me this yourself ? Did you not know how sorry I should be for you ? "

" Yes, I knew," returned the poor fellow, with a groan. He could have put out his hands and prayed her for God's dear love to refrain from torturing him so. What good was it to him for her to recall their innocent friendship, who had

loved her and would dare to love her to his latest breath ? He looked upon her with sad, deprecating eyes.

" Yes, we have been friends—but we shall be so no longer. What happy days Rube and I have had here—and then that time in the Burnley woods ! Well, it's all over now—over and gone as the children say. I shall leave Reuben as my legacy to you. I wonder if you will thank me."

" Don't," cried Rotha, stung into sudden pain. " Mr. Garton, I hardly know you to-night—you are so unlike yourself, so sad and stern ; I am almost afraid of you."

" Afraid of me ?" Garton gave her one of his sudden brilliant smiles for answer, but it soon died away—another of those frank innocent glances would unman him he felt—he must guard himself, he must be very careful ; in another half-hour it would be time for him to take his leave ; he breathed more freely when he remembered this.

" Reuben will fret sadly after me," he continued, with a sigh ; " the lad is terribly constant—I believe the foolish fellow will break his heart over it."

" He will be right," returned Rotha—" I mean"—colouring up crimson—" you have been such a good friend to him. Mr. Garton, will you tell me once for all, why you are going ?"

"Why," repeated Garton, somewhat embarrassed—he had roused from his apathy now, and was looking at her in some confusion. "I suppose because Robert cannot afford to send me to college, or to maintain me any longer in idleness."

"Yes, I know; but is that your only reason?" added Rotha, impatiently.

She was watching the young man with keen wide-open eyes; the evidence of his confusion was clear enough to her. Poor Gar! he was clumsy enough to betray himself at any moment: and then the girl was the cooler of the two. He was more embarrassed than ever as he answered her.

"It was the reason why the New Zealand scheme was first started," he stammered. "I have told you all that over and over again; I knew it was right that I should go, but I could never make up my mind; and lately Robert has been pressing me."

"Mr. Garton, do you remember that text about the plough and the looking back?"

"Yes, I do," he returned with an emphasis that startled her, "and, God helping, I mean to act upon it."

This was not what Rotha meant.

"I don't know in what way you are contriving to twist my meaning," she said, rather bewildered. "I meant, of course, is it right for you to renounce

the desire and fixed purpose of your life to enter the Church?"

What made Garton suddenly pass his hand before his eyes?

"I would rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God"—how often he had chanted those words in the daily services, and what fullness of meaning had they not borne to him? had he not desired with pure hands to serve in the sanctuary? Very slowly and reverently he answered her—"Yes, it is right."

"But why?" persisted Rotha.

"Because it has been plainly shown me that my work and place are elsewhere. I have hoped against hope. I have waited till I am heart-sick. Miss Maturin, don't let us talk any more about this."

"But I must talk about it; how am I to help you and keep silence? Mr. Garton, if this be your only reason you need never go to New Zealand. I will make it all right with the Vicar."

"You, Miss Maturin?"

"Yes, I—do you think that I am not to be allowed to earn my title of friend; you forget I am 'the little Sister.' Mary—Mrs. Ord, I mean—calls me her Aladdin's Lamp, and her Fortunatus' cap, and all sorts of pleasant titles. We were talking about wishing-wells in Burnley woods the other day, Mr. Garton. I wont promise to

conjure up the little cottage with the bow-window, and the telescope, and big dog; but I think I can manage about the college."

" You! what do you mean?" demanded Gartton, harshly; a dark flush rose to his face—his hands worked nervously. Was she going to help him—was she—ah! but it was hard, terribly hard.

" It does not matter what I mean," returned Rotha, with a low musical laugh, but she coloured too as she spoke. " His Reverence and I will settle it all between us. Do you remember how we managed about Rube; Mr. Robert need not know."

" Do you mean that you propose to pay my college expenses, and that you are going up to the Vicarage to tell Austin so?"

" There is no reason to put it in such plain words," faltered Rotha; " and, after all, you are to know nothing about it, the Vicar and I will settle it. You are not too proud to take such a little thing from me?" she continued, winningly, as she stretched out her hand to him—the little soft thin hand whose touch he knew so well; the poor boy trembled all over as he took it.

" You won't refuse such a little thing to your friend?" she continued, pleadingly; then he shook his head.

" I could refuse you nothing, Miss Maturin—Rotha, do you think I could be proud with you?

it is not that ; no—don't stop me, you know I must go away."

"But why?" she persisted, pitiless in her sweetness, and her eyes looked so softly at him.

Garton burst into something like a groan, and then he threw her hand away from him with a violence that hurt her.

"You ask me that,—you—you—when you must know how people are talking ! Do you think I can stay here," he continued, passionately, "and be accused of such things, when perhaps it may end in your believing them ?"

"What things ? Who is talking ?—about you and me do you mean ?" A dim perception of his meaning began to dawn on her. "Look how you have hurt me," she said piteously, in the childish way that was so irresistible to him ; "are you angry with me because people choose to say foolish things of us ?"

"But if you come to believe them," he repeated, hoarsely. "Forgive me, Rotha ; I am half mad to-night. I would rather die than harm a hair of your head. If I am a beggar," cried poor Gar, "I am a gentleman, and more's the pity."

"Sit down and tell me what you mean, and why you call me Rotha to-night, Mr. Garton?" She laid her hand on his sleeve with a soft persistence that compelled him to yield to her. Rotha was very pale now, but she was the

calmer of the two. To tell the truth, she forgot herself at the sight of his excessive agitation, which puzzled and frightened her at the same time. "What are people saying about us, and why do you so assure me that you are a gentleman?"

"I beg your pardon," said Garton, vehemently, "if I have offended you it is for the first time; no man can bid good-bye to the woman he loves and measure his words; if I say 'good-bye, and God bless you, Rotha,' you need not be angry with me, you will only be Rotha in my prayers."

The woman he loved—he—Garton—her Garton. Rotha was deadly white now, and then she turned crimson to her finger ends; but he could not see her face, it was so averted from him; at his next words it drooped lower and lower. Had she dreamed this, could it indeed be true? What was the meaning of that strange new happiness that set her heart beating so wildly? Not for worlds—not for worlds could she have spoken then.

"Forgive me," said Gar, he had risen again to his feet, and was regarding her mournfully; "you know now why I stayed away. I ought not to have come here to-night, and you have tried me so, beyond my strength even. They thought I was a fortune-hunter, and that I dared to aspire to an heiress. They little knew me.

If we never meet again after to-night—and we never shall with my consent—look up in my face and tell me, Rotha, that you never suspected me of such meanness."

She looked up quickly to the honest face above her, and then drooped her head lower than ever.

"Never—never!" she faltered; "how dare they say so?"

"What does it matter," he continued, cheered by her manifest sympathy; "what does anything matter so that you think well of me. I can go more happily now."

"Why should you go?" faltered Rotha. How pale her face was!

"Hush, you must not tempt me; how can you, knowing what you know now. Of course I must go away; how can I bear to live on here, and see you every day, and know," and his voice trembled, "and know you are not for me." He paused, and then went on, "You must not be sorry now I have told you this. I could not help it. I could not indeed. God bless you, dear, for your noble thought, as I shall bid God bless you in my prayers when I am far away."

The little hand trembled out to him again from the folds of the grey dress; there were tears in the bright kind eyes; the sweet face was covered with blushes.

"Don't go, Garton; I want you." And then

in a voice of intense feeling, "I was a poor girl, without a friend but Meg in the world, till all these good things came to me; but what are they worth—what is anything worth—unless I may share them with those I love?"

Could he mistake those brave tender words? The strong man trembled like a child when he heard them.

"Rotha, do you mean me?" he whispered; and Rotha, looking up with a smile and a blush said, "Yes."

CHAPTER II.

A LOVE IDYLL.

“ Moon of the summer night !
 Far down yon western steep
 Sink, sink in silver light !
 She sleeps, my lady sleeps !
 Sleeps !

“ Dreams of the summer night
 Tell her her lover keeps
 Watch while in slumbers light
 She sleeps, my lady sleeps !
 Sleeps !”

LONGFELLOW.

AND after that neither of them knew exactly what had happened. The Prince had come to Rotha—the Prince in the shabby coat—but this time it was the Princess who had held out her little hand to him.

“ Don’t go, Garton ; I want you.”

“ Do you know what you have said, Rotha ?” asked Garton ; “ do you understand what your words imply ?”

“ Oh, hush ! yes, I know,” returned Rotha, hurriedly.

She sat in her place a little shy and frightened. She cast odd, wistful looks at Garton, who was standing beside her with a face transfigured with joy. The poor fellow would have liked to have

knebt down and kissed the hem of her garment for very reverence and gratitude ; he would have burst into some fond worshipping phrase if he had known how—but Rotha understood him. She thought his silence very eloquent ; the chiming of a church bell jarred on them like a discord, startling Rotha by the lateness of the hour.

“ How late it is ; you must go now,” said the girl, softly.

She took away her hand with a little decision. She looked up at him with bright, impatient eyes as though bidding him to leave her.

“ If I go now I may come again to-morrow, may I not ? ” said Garton, lingering. “ I shall wake up and think it is only a dream, I know. Are you sure that you really meant it ? ” persisted the foolish fellow ; “ what am I to tell my brothers, Rotha ? Of course Robert must know if I am not to go away.”

“ Tell them what you will,” returned Rotha, blushing ; “ I suppose they will understand that you were unhappy, and that I would not let you go.” She grew rather hot over her lover’s incredulity. “ Of course I meant it when I said I wanted you,” she said, a little tremulously ; she was dazed, and his impatience bewildered her.

“ Come, Garton, you must go now.”

She put out a soft hand again, and half led

half drew, the excited young man to the door. She let him out herself into the wind and storm. It might have rained showers of roses on them both. A shy, sweet good-night followed him through the darkness. Garton, turning round in the garden path, saw her standing still with flowing dress and hair on the doorstep, with the silver lamp in her hand. The radiant figure haunted him all night long.

Rotha went up to Meg when she had let out Garton. Meg was not asleep when she entered. The elder woman knew at once by the girl's kisses and silence that something had happened. She drew her into her arms without a word, and let her cry softly to herself. Rotha shed a few tears of wonder, and happiness, and excitement on Meg's shoulder. The strain and flurry of the last few hours had worn her out. This natural outlet to her pent-up feelings soothed and relieved her. By-and-by she sat up and told her friend all.

I don't think Meg was so much surprised ; she lay and listened with a throbbing head to the shy recital. How strange and yet how familiar it all sounded. A hot quiver of pain darted through Meg's temples as she thought how she had known it all. Meg lost herself once in the midst of the girl's eager talk : the pine logs fell asunder, sending out a shower of sparkling

fragments. A cricket came out and chirped upon the hearth, the room was full of a clear ruddy light. Meg is back again in the shabby parlour of Chatham Place. There she is, a tall ungainly figure, with faded pinks in her belt. She is playing on the cracked old piano, the cool evening air comes through the wire blinds, the room is filled with warm spicy smells, there is a bowl of dull red carnations. "Encore, encore!" cries somebody from a distance. "Play that again, Maggie," says a sweet old voice. A wrinkled hand beats time softly. "Ay, do, Madge, it is my favourite." A tall figure blocks up the light. Handsome Jack Carruthers is standing behind her, a dark intent face leans down to hers. Are those her tears splashing on the ivory keys? "Ay, Jack, for better, for worse, nay, for worse, worse only." Meg wakes up with a start and shiver, and a dull shadow seems creeping over the room.

"Do you love him? Are you sure you are happy? He is very good, but not good enough for my darling," says Meg, when Rotha had finished.

"Good, I wish I were half as good as he is," thought Rotha, when she went up to her room. She was a little disappointed at Mrs. Carruthers' reception of her news. Meg had said very little, but she had kissed Rotha, and wept over her.



"It is too late to ask my advice now," Meg had said, very solemnly, "and perhaps, after all, I should not have cared to give it. You have accepted Garton Ord's love, and I pray that he may be worthy of my darling's choice, but I would have her be very sure of herself and of him too."

Rotha had gone upstairs with these words ringing in her ears. In spite of her happiness they had a little sobered her. It was clear that Meg had been thinking of her own unhappy choice. To her such a subject must always be more or less invested with gloom. Nevertheless the words had been said, and Rotha had felt herself somewhat sobered by them.

"Do you love him? Are you sure you are happy?" Meg had asked her anxiously, and then she had averred it as her conviction that he was hardly worthy of her friend's love. Doubtless it was rather chilling to the girl's enthusiasm; she sat down a little troubled as she pondered over Meg's words.

"Was she sure?" Of course she was. Rotha repelled the doubt indignantly. Was he not the best, the noblest, the dearest? Her breast heaved, her eyes filled with tears, as a hundred recollections of the young man's goodness crossed her mind. Rotha was right when she felt that she loved him dearly. Nevertheless Meg was right too. Mrs. Carruthers had grasped the truth

instinctively when she told herself that Rotha's affection for Garton Ord was more a sentiment than a passion, and that the imagination had as much to do with it as the heart.

Propinquity has much to do with such cases. Do you remember the quaint old name that Shakespeare has given to the pansy?—"and maidens call it Love in Idleness." How many a girl and boy fancy has grown out of summer's wanderings and the *dolce far niente* of holiday time; youth, spring-time, and love joining hand in hand. In after years things are different. Damon is not for ever piping to his Chloe; a little honey may refresh the eyes, but too much sweetness may cloy a man's palate for all that. Adam as he delves in the sweat of his brow, is not always thinking of his future Eve. One who has lately gone from us, and who gave his all of earthly love to one woman, as child and girl and wedded wife, once said, "Love is the business, but not the sole business of a man's life."

But in all youthful drawings there is a great lack of perspective. The nearer objects fill up space. A single interest is to last them for a lifetime. Beyond the present moment is eternity or nothingness.

Youth is grandiloquent, vast, imaginative; neither is it always "the sounding brass or the tinkling cymbal" that sceptical middle age calls

it ; the boyhood of great men never fails to contain some germ of that greatness—the love of youth will sometimes blossom from the grave itself.

Rotha had always had a pleasant liking for Garton ; his society had become a sort of necessity to her. Those three days of his absence had seemed a break in her life ; he had fallen out of her daily existence, and Rotha had been restless. Garton was away from her, unhappy and miserable, and all the sweetness had gone out of everything in consequence.

And after that it had all come so suddenly on her, "and maidens called it Love in Idleness," or, as Meg would have said, love in pity, or out of pity. When Rotha questioned her heart in the presence of Garton its answer appeared conclusive. She put out her hand to him with a great throb of pity and love, with genuine blushes, with a little burst of honest frankness. She would make him happy ; it must all come right, she thought. Poor Gar's passionate protestations awoke responsive thrills.

Rotha was in a great measure blind to Garton's failings. The faults that provoked others were to her but the errors of circumstance. In some degree he was glorified in her eyes. The stern or ascetic side of Garton's nature, which Mrs. Carruthers found so grievous, was simply admirable to the young girl, who would have

gone through fire and water for those she loved. She looked at Garton through the glamour of her own imagination. She invested him with a hundred imaginary attributes. Garton, with all his clumsy honesty and his tender heart, would have fallen far short of this standard, for no one knew his own faults better than Gar did.

As she thought about it now, Meg's doubts ceased to harass her. "He will owe everything to me. I shall make up to him for all his disappointments and his wasted life," she said to herself. "I need not fear that he does not love me for myself now. How noble of him to go away without asking for anything, and now he will have it all. Have it all."

When Burnley Woods are green with summer sap, when the red leaves of autumn flame deep in windy hollows, or when the winter snows lie crisp and untrodden in the bosky dells, how will Ratha Maturin remember that she has promised to be Garton Ord's wife ?

CHAPTER III.

BETWIXT AND BETWEEN.

- “ En avant—en avant ! not doubting, nor fearing,
 Though clouds gather round thee, obscuring the sun,
 Yet turn not away from the duties before thee,
 Give each thy whole strength as they come ‘one by one.’
- “ Steadfast and strong, though the path should be lonely—
 Never look back though thy heart seem to yearn
 To linger awhile with the beautiful day-dreams
 That come with their brightness to tempt us to turn.
- “ Sweet the reward when the labour is ended,
 To feel that each day thou hast faithfully striven ;
 It may be that soon the great Master will call thee
 To render account for the life He has given.”

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

As for Garton, he went home through the wind and rain as though he were treading on air. He came back once and put his lips to the stone where the silver lamp had been gleaming. He murmured a thousand blessings as he looked up at the curtained window where the firelight was still playing on the blind. He imagined her still sitting there in her grey dress, with downcast eyes, thinking of him. He would have lingered there, Heaven knows how long, in the rain and darkness, keeping watch and ward over that hallowed threshold, but for Rotha’s little Skye terrier Fidgets, who flew barking at him round a

corner. He quitted the dim garden walks with reluctance. I wonder what Rotha would have said if she had seen him pacing up and down underneath the soaking evergreens? a useless waste of strength and a great lack of common sense, seem very necessary to the young lover in the fierce new frenzy that possesses him. I verily believe that Garton would have paced on there quite happily for hours, entirely oblivious of his outer man, but for Fidgets' annoying attentions. The dog positively refused to recognise his friend. He growled at Garton's wet overcoat, till Garton gave up the contest and retired.

He performed a few more acts of worship, however, in the front of the house, leaning on the gate which Rotha and he had so often entered. Was Rotha or he the happier now? "Oh, God bless her for all her dear love and goodness to me!" cried Gar, lifting his hat in his youthful chivalry. How many more delirious things he would have said and done are doubtful, but Fidgets found him out again, and came grumbling through an aperture in the wall. Jock and Jasper from the Vicarage joined in the duet inside, and all the village dogs took up the chorus, while Garton, baffled by the canine music, took himself and his raptures on to the sea-wall, till he felt sober enough to go back to Robert.

The study looked very cosy when Garton entered. The fire was blazing, the lamp freshly

trimmed, and the Vicar sat in the arm-chair which Garton usually occupied opposite to Robert, with Cinders comfortably curled up on his knee. Garton could hear their voices as he climbed up the dark staircase. The cheerful light almost dazed him coming in from the gloom outside.

Robert broke off directly at Garton's entrance. His face looked flushed and excited, his eyes sparkling, his whole appearance and manner changed. The Vicar also looked beaming. The two confronted him with some curiosity. Garton, with his radiant face, his wet coat and muddy boots, presented a strange appearance to his two brothers. Austin put his hand on his wet shoulder rather anxiously, and Robert exclaimed in surprise—

“Why, where have you been, Gar?—it is nearly eleven o'clock; and, my dear fellow, just look at your boots.”

“Yes, I know,” returned Garton, not looking at them, however, and shaking himself like a water spaniel. “I have been with a friend a part of the evening, and since then I have been taking a walk by myself on the sea-wall.”

He did not add that his friend had been Rotha, and if Robert had any suspicion as to the cause of his radiant looks he did not say so.

Austin was the next to speak.

“Making the most of your liberty, eh? Now

I'll be bound your friend was Rube Armstrong, and that you were both making a night of it up at Bryn. Here have Robert and I been wearing out our patience waiting for you. Mary has sent in once to know when I was coming, but I would not go till Robert had told you the news."

"What news? It ought to be pleasant to judge by Bob's face," replied Gar, dreamily. He wondered with a sort of pride if they could guess how little their news could affect him. It was something to see Robert look happy, however. "Is Belle better?" he asked, with a consciousness that this news must be about her."

"Better. No, I cannot say that she is," replied the Vicar, becoming a little grave at the question. "Mary will have it that she gets gradually worse."

"Oh, Mary is always croaking," interrupted Robert, hastily.

"It is natural that she should be anxious about her only sister," returned the Vicar, mildly. "I cannot bear to see her worry herself so; it is making her quite thin. You know you were getting anxious yourself, Robert."

"Yes, but this will make all the difference; it will put a stop to the unsettled state of things; and then the change of climate, you know."

"You think then of arranging it before May?" inquired the Vicar, significantly.

Robert nodded, and then looked at Garton.

"We have not told him your news yet. Look here, Gar, we are talking in hieroglyphics, old fellow. What should you say if you had not to go to New Zealand after all?"

Gar stared at him stupidly. Not to go? Of course he was not going now, but how did they know? Robert took up his brother's parable rather impatiently.

"That is not the way to begin, Austin. Gar will never understand us like that. Listen to me, Gar. You recollect Aunt Charlotte's oldest friend, Mr. Ramsay, of Stretton?"

"Remember him? Of course I do. Emma Ramsay was a pretty girl, too," he added, mischievously, for his brother's benefit, and, for a wonder, Robert did not resent the joke.

"Well, she is Emma Tregarthen now—Lady Tregarthen, I should say; and is prettier than she ever was, only rather stout. Well, what should you say, Garton, at Mr. Ramsay sending for me early this morning in quite a friendly way, and telling me that he had accidentally heard that I was managing clerk at Broughton and Clayton's, and not getting on so well as I ought in the world, and then making me the most brilliant offer you ever imagined?"

"I should say he was a jolly old fellow and no end of a brick," cried Garton, rapturously. "Is he going to take you into the works at Stretton? Bravo, Bob! The star of the Ords is rising now,"

and, boyish as ever, he clapped his brother gaily on the shoulder.

"No nonsense, Gar, you have not heard me out. He can't take me in at Stretton, though I see he wants me, because Carter refuses to be superannuated, and very sensible too of Carter; by-the-bye, he told me, Austin, that he had always hoped to see me at the head of that concern, in poor Bob Ramsay's place, but, of course, the fates would not have it," moralized Robert, looking very handsome and sentimental as behoves a man who had had to choose between two beautiful girls.

"That was when he hoped you would be his son-in-law," returned the Vicar, smiling. "It is getting late, my dear fellow, and you are leaving Garton a long time in the dark."

"Not in the dark now," answered Gar with a happy laugh, but of course his brother misunderstood him.

"What do you guess?" asked Robert, in surprise. "I don't think I ever was so much taken aback in my life as when Mr. Ramsay told me, that knowing how my abilities were thrown away, he had taken the liberty to recommend me to the house of Fullagrove and Burton, old correspondents of his, who had applied to him for a well-qualified English manager."

"An American house," exclaimed Garton, opening his eyes.



" Yes, I should have preferred England, if only for Belle's sake, not but what she will be willing to accompany me," he continued with a smile ; " still it is hard parting her and Mary. It is all arranged, Mr. Ramsay has the power to arm me with full credentials. I have given Broughton and Clayton three months' notice. My salary is to be six or seven hundred a year, and I trust before two months are out Belle will be well enough to marry me. Mr. Ramsay says there can be no objection to my taking a wife out, as we are to have a house rent free on the premises. So Belle will be quite a rich woman," finished Robert ; but his voice was a little husky, as he thought how late, how very late, all these good things had come to them. More than once the fear had crossed his mind that evening, that Belle was hardly fit for the new duties that she was to take on herself.

" Have you told her ?" asked Gar, excitedly. " My dear Bob, I heartily congratulate you ;" he was a little absent now and then ; he wondered when a break in his brother's talk would allow him to bring out his news. It was glorious to think that Belle and Robert were at last to be married, and there could be but one opinion at Robert's good fortune, but he must be forgiven a little natural egotism, if he wished that Robert would not be quite so prolix.

" No, I have not told Belle yet ; Mary begged

me to say nothing to-night. Garton, you don't look half surprised enough, and you don't ask me why you are not to go to New Zealand."

"No," returned Garton, trying to suppress his impatience, "I forgot all about that part of it, Robert."

"Well, I am coming to it now. Mr. Ramsay did not send for me this morning only to tell me this news, but because he thought I should be a likely person to assist him in a sudden difficulty; he has no sons, as you know, and his staff, though efficient, is somewhat small, and he wants a trustworthy person with a fair amount of brains to discharge rather a delicate commission for him."

"Well!" ejaculated Garton. Robert was decidedly prosy in his happiness; these particulars were not at all interesting to Garton; he began to think of Rotha standing out in the dark with a silver lamp in her hand; he could hear the sweet good-night echoing among the trees; he shifted his place and moved restlessly, somewhat to Austin's amusement, as Robert went on with his explanations.

"You see he is rather in a fix just now, as the Yankees say; he has just heard from very reliable sources, that the Vera Cruz mines in South America are not yielding profits to the shareholders; that in fact there are rumours of

immense losses. Mr. Ramsay is not one of the directors, but he has dabbled very largely in shares ; and the person he has appointed to watch his interests over there has not quite come up to the mark. Some of the most influential shareholders have been selling out, a panic has been the result, and the directors want to hush it up ; in fact, Mr. Ramsay cannot satisfy himself whether there be serious cause for alarm or not ;—do you follow me ?”

“ Of course I do,” returned Garton, impatiently ; he could not understand what Robert was driving at, or why these lengthy particulars should be interesting to him. The Vicar, who was watching him, exchanged a droll smile with Robert.

“ It does not strike you as particularly interesting does it ? Well, it will soon ; don’t be in a hurry, Gar ; it is coming presently. Well, Mr. Ramsay would go over himself, but he is not as young as he was, and he dreads the voyage ; but he asked me if I knew of any one tolerably trusty who would go over there, and who would watch the whole thing for him and keep his eyes and ears open. The process, as Mr. Ramsay explained it, is very simple. His principal business would be to seek out a certain retired Spanish merchant, of whom Mr. Ramsay has lost sight for many years ; this Don Gomez would give you—I mean the person in question—

every reliable information that was to be had. You see it is very simple, the only thing is, there's not a moment to be lost ; Mr. Ramsay wants immediate action."

It was evident Garton was getting very restive, he understood now at what Robert was aiming ; he would have to bring out his news in a very different way than he intended ; this long business talk was intolerable.

" Well, Gar," continued Robert, good-humouredly, " I suppose you know what I am after now. Mr. Ramsay offered very handsome terms, and I owed him a good turn for what he had done for me. Of course I told him that my brother would be the person. Aren't you glad it is South America and not New Zealand, Gar ?"

" You told him I would go ?" burst out Gar, " How dare you ?—I beg your pardon—what right had you to say such a thing without my leave, Robert ?"

" Tut ! lad, don't lose your temper. Austin, just look at him. Do you think I would have answered for you if I had not been sure of your consent ? Have you not been breaking your heart days enough over the New Zealand scheme ? and didn't you tell me that you would go anywhere, to Timbuctoo if I liked ?"

" Circumstances alter cases," returned Garton—his muscles were quivering — his whole

frame seemed strung up to the contest—he looked every inch an Ord. “I hope you have not given your word, Robert, for I do not mean to go to New Zealand or South America either.”

“Hear him,” returned Robert, in calm exasperation; “did you ever see any one so provoking in your life, Austin?”

“I thought you would have been overjoyed, Gar,” said the Vicar, reprovingly. “Robert thought he was doing the best for you; he knew how you hated the thought of leaving England. The whole thing would not occupy you more than five or six months; it would simply be a pleasant change, and Mr. Ramsay held out the hope to Robert that if you pleased him in the way you discharged your commission, he would take you into his works at Stretton.”

“And,” put in Robert with an uneasy glance at Garton, “I would not have given my word to Mr. Ramsay if I had had a doubt of your approval; but there was not a moment to be lost, not a moment, Garton. He wants you to start by the *Phoenix* next Wednesday.”

“And what did you say, Robert,” asked Garton, trying to keep himself still.

“I told him you would go,” returned Robert, steadily. “Why, Gar, what’s the matter with you?”

“Oh, good heavens, give me patience,” cried

poor Gar. "Robert, you were wrong, very wrong, to pledge your word to Mr. Ramsay. How am I to go now? Indeed I cannot. Rotha Maturin and I are engaged."

A dead silence followed Garton's hasty words. If a thunderbolt had fallen between the three they could scarcely have appeared more astonished; the Vicar, especially, could hardly believe his ears.

"Engaged! You and Rotha Maturin!" he gasped out; but Robert interrupted him—

"Do you intend to tell us that you have had the meanness to propose to her?" he almost thundered. But perhaps it is not well to repeat the words of a man when he is angry; forbearance and a tolerant estimate of other men's motives were not among Robert Ord's virtues. The Vicar, too, was at first scarcely less displeased. You see they could not rid themselves of the impression that Garton had taken an ungenerous advantage of the young heiress.

"Go on," said Garton, with a little scorn; "I shall not defend myself."

He folded his arms and listened with pale face and fiery eyes to Robert's brief cutting speeches. The Vicar looked disturbed, as well he might, at the high words that raged between the brothers. Oh, the Ord temper! Garton had his share of it without doubt.

"Hush! that will do, Robert," said Austin, in an authoritative manner.

His great calm voice seemed to have an instantaneous effect on the excited young men. He put his hand on Robert's shoulder as he spoke.

"I don't think we ought to be so hard on him, Bobus," using unconsciously the name that belonged to their boyhood. "Let us rather hear what the lad has to say for himself."

"He ought to have gone away like a man without saying anything," returned Robert, bitterly; "he told me he would."

"I never said that I would go away without bidding her good-bye," replied the other vehemently. "Would you have me slink off like a thief or a coward? was it my fault that I loved her," burst out Gar, "when every one in my place must have done the same?"

"No, no," broke in the compassionate Vicar. He began to estimate the force of Garton's temptation. He held out his hand to the poor boy kindly.

"We've been too hard on you, Gar. Tell us how it all happened, lad."

That touch of real sympathy beat down all Garton's stubbornness in a moment. His eyes glistened. The sullen look passed out of his face.

"I will tell you, Austin," he said, eagerly, "but I will have nothing to do with any of his

questions. If Robert chooses to insult me he may take the consequences. I never went near Bryn at all till she sent for me."

"Sent for you!" echoed the Vicar, in surprise.

Robert looked up then with gloomy eyes, but said nothing.

"Yes, she sent me a message by Rube. She had heard all about my going away, and wanted to prevent it; you, who know so much about her generosity, Austin, can guess what she offered me. She was pressing it on me, poor dear, as innocently as though she were my sister, and I got up and flung her hand away. I don't think I quite knew what I was about, Austin, and then it all came out."

"Hush! don't say any more. Yes, I understand;" he turned his back on Garton, and began to walk up and down the room as though somewhat agitated; understand—of course he did—he could see it all clearly. The frank offer of assistance and the abrupt refusal; the girl's innocent reproaches, and the poor fellow's sudden burst of anguish; he could fancy the sternness with which Garton flung away the little hand and rose to depart. Perhaps she saw his look of despair, and—

"Yes, yes, I see how it was," muttered the Vicar; he turned back and put his hands on



Garton's shoulders, and looked up in the young man's face with kind wistful eyes.

"Do you think you are worthy of her, Gar? Oh, Gar, you are both so young for your age; are you sure that you know your own minds?"

Garton was silent a moment, and an expression almost of sadness crossed his face. "I shall try my best, Austin, you may depend on that; but how can I ever hope to come up to her?"

The Vicar smiled a little sadly; he seemed about to speak and then checked himself.

"You were going to say something, Austin?"

"Yes, but I was afraid I might hurt you; the fact is the world will judge you somewhat harshly in this, Garton; it will say, and justly too I think, that a man has no right to owe everything to his wife."

"That is what I say," muttered Robert. Garton looked from one to the other rather doubtfully.

"Perhaps it might not do in some cases," he said at last, very slowly. "Of course I should prefer it otherwise, any man would; but I shall not be such a fool as to let my pride stand in the way. I think it would be cowardly after what she said," and the dark face worked, and softened as he remembered Rotha's words—"I

was but a poor girl, Garton, without a friend in the world but Meg when these good things came to me, but what are they worth—what is anything worth—unless I share them with those I love?" She had said this to him in her sweet humility, would he ever forget those words? He knew what she meant; with womanly generosity she was stripping herself of all adventitious distinctions; her wealth was to be apart from herself, a mere adjunct of circumstances. In these few words she would have him know that in her sight they were more than equals.

Rotha's unworldly nature was likely to be a great comfort to Garton; it gave him strength now to repel his brother's forcible argument; it was not well in some cases, perhaps, but to be daunted by such a bugbear as this would be unmanly, he told himself; but Austin's words were, nevertheless, very grievous to him.

He stood with a clouded face, while Austin looked at his watch and exclaimed abruptly at the lateness of the hour.

"If you are going in next door I shall come with you," he said with some decision, when the Vicar seemed preparing for departure. Austin sighed wearily, but offered no objection to the lad's impatience: the conversation would keep he thought till to-morrow, but Garton was evidently not of his opinion. Robert watched them out

with gloomy eyes ; he sighed bitterly once or twice when he was left alone.

“Who would have thought the boy would have had such good taste,” he said, half aloud, as he dragged his chair nearer to the fire and stirred the decaying embers together. “Pshaw! if she be what they make out, how could such a woman care for him?” he continued, disdainfully. He struck the logs heavily with his boots—a shower of bright sparks flew hither and thither. “Gar has no pride,” he muttered, leaning his elbows on his knees and staring at the flame. “If I had loved her ever so, I would have gone away without saying one word to her, if she looked at me for ever with her soft pitiful eyes; eyes—I never saw any woman’s like them, they talk to you almost like a dumb animal’s;” he shaded his with his hand, and looked steadily into the lurid cavern before him. What face was that that seemed to start up suddenly before him? Not Belle’s certainly: there is no halo of pale golden hair, no grey eyes brimful of unspoken fondness. This is a sweet tired face, with brown hair blowing softly over the temples, the lips quiver sadly, the eyes are full of passionate brown fire. “I would rather walk till I dropped, till I died before I touched your arm;” he wonders with a groan when these bitter words will cease to haunt him. Well, Garton has a strong arm, and she will lean on that—on that—

a strange smile wreathes his pale lips, as he follows out this thought—"Oh, Robert, Robert Ord, the time will soon come when you will wish that you had never been born than that you should see such a sight as that."

I can imagine what sort of kind brotherly counsel the Vicar gave when the study door had closed on them twain, and how he forgot his weariness, and patiently listened to the young man's eager outpourings. Garton got more than a glimpse of the great loving heart then ; he listened with tender reverence when Austin touched gently on his failings, and pointed out the path of duty that lay before him.

" You must go away that you may be worthy of her," he said, not heeding how Garton winced at his words. " You must work bravely for her and yourself too before you can enjoy your reward. When you come back you will be in a far different position, Garton, from what you now occupy. Then you will have enough to pay your college expenses, your career will be open to you, and the good things will not come into empty hands as they do now."

" Enough, I will go," said the young man ; he held out his hand to his brother, and the Vicar was almost startled at his paleness. " I hope you wont have reason to repent of your advice, Austin," he added with a wistful smile,

touching in its sadness, "but it shall never be said that Garton Ord shirked his duty."

He went back into the next house, and walked up straight to Robert, who was still sitting, brooding over the embers, with his elbows on his knees.

"Well," said Robert, not looking up at him, however, "you and Austin have found plenty to talk about."

"You are right," returned Garton, sadly. All the brightness had gone out of his face, he looked weary and dull. "Robert, you meant it for the best, and I wont say any longer that you were wrong. I will go by the *Phoenix* on Wednesday." Robert looked up quickly, and then in a moment all his sullenness melted, and his whole heart yearned over his brother.

"God bless you, lad, you have lifted a weight off my mind. I did give my word, and Gar, I really thought I was doing it for your good."

"Don't let's say another word about it, Bob. I've got to do it, and that's all."

"Yes, but I must say something. Look here, dear boy, I did not mean half of all those hard things I have been saying."

"Didn't you, Robert?"

"No, of course not, but I felt for the moment as though you had gone and disgraced us all."

"I shall never do anything to disgrace you," returned Garton, quietly. "How can I when

she cares for me? I am glad you have told me this, Bobus. It makes it easier for me to go away. If I never come back," his voice faltered, "you will try to think the best of me, wont you, dear old Bobus,?" And before his brother could answer, he dashed his hand across his eyes, and hurriedly left the room.

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN'S REASON :—"I LOVE HIM BECAUSE
I LOVE HIM."

"She look'd: but all
Suffused with blushes—neither self-possess'd
Nor startled, but betwixt this mood and that,
Divided in a graceful quiet—paused,
And dropt the branch she held, and turning wound
Her looser hair in braid and stirr'd her lips
For some sweet answer." TENNYSON.

"Dear soul, not so!
That time doth keep for us some happy years,
That God hath portion'd out our smiles and tears,
Thou knowest and I know."

"Therefore I bear
This winter-tide as bravely as I may,
Patiently waiting for the bright spring day,
That cometh with thee, Dear." ARENOLD.

THE bright beams of a December sun awoke Rotha the next morning, and a pleasant conviction that things were not quite as they were yesterday, and that something very wonderful had befallen her, was the first sensation that stole upon her weariness.

How different everything was from yesterday!

Then she had wakened to a sense of weariness and discomfort, a cold sea-fog had enveloped everything; Meg had come shivering into her room, bringing a gust of raw dampness with her.

But to-day when Rotha opened her eyes all was glitter and light : a fresh wind swept over the lawn, stirring the shining rainpools ; the drops were still glistening on the evergreens, a robin chirped busily in the ivy. Out beyond in the morning sun, lay the chain of low grass hillocks, long stretches of yellow sands, and then the blue curve of the bay—Welburn sloping in the distance like a breadth of dun-coloured cloud. Everywhere, as far as the eye could reach, were salt ponds, trails of black seaweed, purple rocks uncovered in the sun, and masses of hummocky sand. Rotha looked almost as bright as the morning itself as she sat opposite Meg at the sunny breakfast-table ; upstairs, Prue and Catherine were singing over their work ; the open windows and clanging doors bore witness to the fresh sea-breezes. Hannah Farebrothers, in her snowy sunbonnet, was pulling cabbages in the kitchen-garden. Peter came in at the green door on the lawn with Jock and Jasper barking at his heels ; Fidgets flew down the lawn, his every hair bristling, to repel the intruders ; and Garton's black cat, Cinders, who was taking a constitutional on her neighbour's wall, stepped gingerly among the broken bottles, looking down at them all in sooty disdain.

“ What a beautiful day ! oh, how happy I am ! ” thought Rotha, as, breakfast over, she stood by the open glass door feeding the robins ; she broke

off to wave a smiling good-bye to Meg, who went down the garden with her music-books under her arm.

"I am going to the organ first, and then to the school," Meg had said to her. Rotha looked after her with curious, wistful eyes. "How strange it must feel to have lived one's life and to have been disappointed with it," thought the girl, sadly. "Meg cares only for her children and her music; she has no world of her own at all; she only lives in other people's lives—in mine and in little Stacy Maurice's, for example. I fancy, by the way she talks about her, that Stacy is her favourite. She spends her whole life in doing good, and praying for that good-for-nothing husband of hers; and yet I suppose when she married him she expected to be happy as I am," moralized Rotha, with the unconscious superiority of one who feels that her own life will be so different.

She was rather absent when Hannah came in with a budget of domestic news. She gave all sorts of contradictory orders to the astonished woman, and then laughed and scolded herself in a breath. While Hannah talked about the miller and the price of flour, and the reasons why the last batch of bread had been so slack-baked, and how Prue's grandmother would find them in new-laid eggs all the year round at a cheaper rate than Gammer Stokes would; Rotha was wonder-

ing when Garton would be round, and how he would look, and what she would say to him, and whether he had told the Vicar—which latter point was speedily settled for her by the entrance of the Vicar himself.

Rotha had not expected him, and his visit took her quite by surprise, and for once in her life she felt decidedly nervous; she coloured and stood quite still by the window till he came up to her.

"Well, Rotha," he said. He waited till Mrs. Farebrothers had curtsied and withdrew, and then he held out his two hands to the girl almost fondly. How pretty she looked as she stood there before him with downcast eyes, with her dark lashes sweeping her cheek; the grey dress and soft blue ribbons seemed to lend her colour.

"Is it really so, my child?" he said, earnestly. "Have you quite made up your mind?" And Rotha's happy blush was sufficient answer.

What a long talk was that they had walking up and down the sunny old garden. How wisely, and with what gentleness he talked to her. Rotha lost her shyness now as she listened to him.

He told her in grave, uncompromising words how the world would look upon her choice. "If she had elected to marry Garton," he said, "and had made up her mind that it was for her happiness, it was not for them to inter-

fere. But he would have her consider the thing in all its bearings, and not gloss over its difficulties."

He touched very tenderly too on Garton's failings, taking care to do justice to his nobler qualities. "He is very humble-minded—singularly so," the Vicar added, "and his faith is almost childlike. He will love you dearly, Rotha," he continued; "it is in his nature to be faithful." And then he hinted more than once at that want of ballast, which was Garton's most serious defect.

"Gar is such a lovable fellow, and is so full of grand impulses," he said, regretfully; "but, Rotha, I am half afraid that you are cleverer than he; a woman ought not to be cleverer than her husband."

"Goodness is better than cleverness," returned Rotha, blushing. She claved with a faith that was almost touching to her belief in Garton's goodness, and then she added naïvely, "I hate to be called clever."

"Goodness is not everything," returned the Vicar, gravely. "In marrying, a woman ought to be able to look up to her husband—to lean on him, so to speak. Do you think you could depend on Garton? that you could go to him for advice in all your difficulties and troubles? Be assured, the happiest woman in the world needs such help daily. And then if he could

not give it, think, Rotha, how grievous it would be to be disappointed in him after all."

"I shall not be disappointed. He is sure to be good to me," replied the girl, innocently. "I suppose as he is not much older, that we shall help each other; and then we can always come to you for advice, as I do now," she added, timidly.

"When you have a husband you will go to him. Mary tells me everything." He smiled a little over the girl's refreshing naïveté, though it made him rather grave inwardly. He was afraid, as Mrs. Carruthers was, that Rotha was a little misled by her imagination in her estimate of Garton's character.

Rotha in reality was a good deal puzzled by the Vicar's questions; his solemnity disturbed her. The sun was shining, the birds twittering around her. She was happy; the world was beautiful.

"Oh, why will everybody be so grave about it? Was no one ever engaged before?" thought Rotha, indignantly. "What does it matter if he be not clever, if I love him?" She made up a provoking little face as she turned to the Vicar. "I shall tell Garton that I always come to you for advice," she said, nodding at him. She had taken her handkerchief in her old way, and had tied it gipsy-like over her brown hair. Her eyes were full of shy happiness.

"Well, well," he said, smiling, "if it must be so, it must be, I suppose. If I were Gar, I wouldn't have you with such a proviso. He patted her hand thoughtfully, and then relapsed into gravity.

"Yes, it was a good thing," he said, "for both their sakes, that Garton was going away; it would test the reality of their affection for each other, and would make a man of Gar by teaching him to depend on his own resources; he would come back worthier of her than he was now."

Rotha looked up in some alarm at this.

"Going away—Garton going away!" she said. And just then the Vicar espied Garton himself coming through the trees to meet them.

Another time Rotha would have been rather bashful at thus meeting her lover for the first time under the Vicar's eye; but consternation at this sudden piece of news overbore this feeling, and as Garton came up to them—rather sheepishly, it must be confessed, at the sight of his brother—she put out her hand to him with a little impatience of his delay.

"What is this?" she said, rather peremptorily. "What does it all mean? The Vicar says you are going away." She looked up at him with wide-open eyes full of distress, with a fall of the lip like a child's; she actually believed that Garton was going to New Zealand, after all.

Garton took the little hand tenderly; he looked

from one to the other rather doubtfully. The Vicar was grieved to see how worn and haggard Garton's face still was: strong agitation, sleeplessness, and the alternation from despair to sudden joy, and now the reluctance with which he viewed his enforced absence for so many months, made sad ravages in the young man's appearance; the radiant look of last night had almost disappeared.

"What have you told her, Austin?" he said, addressing his brother. "Robert has detained me, Rotha; I meant to have told you myself." He held her hand in a grip that was almost painful.

"Don't—you are hurting me; you are always hurting me, Garton," said the girl, in a droll voice.

After the Vicar had left them she showed the red mark to Garton, who looked grave over it.

"My great hands are enough to crush those little fingers," he said, stroking them remorsefully. "What a little hand you have, Rotha; such a small thin hand!"

"Never mind, it is not a pretty one," returned Rotha, hastily, drawing it away. "Garton, am I to understand that you are not going to New Zealand, after all?"

"To New Zealand!" laughed Gar. "No; not unless you have a fancy for going there too,

Rotha. I can't say that I have any desire just now to pitch my tent among wigwams."

"Are there wigwams in New Zealand? How funny!" exclaimed Rotha. "I thought by the Vicar's laughing that I must be wrong, after all; but he certainly said that you were going away; and when—and where?" demanded Rotha, somewhat puzzled.

"Rotha, dear, I will tell you. Yes, I am going away," he returned in a troubled voice. He began to explain to her as well as he could how it had all come about, but at the first mention of Robert's name she stopped him.

"Robert thinks it necessary! What right has he to interfere between you and me? If he hates me, is that any reason why he should send you away?" she exclaimed, indignantly.

"Hush, dear! no one sends me away. I am going because it is right for me to go," returned Gar, with a touch of sturdy independence. "Sweet heart,"—the young man used the word in its Saxon sense, which rendered it infinitely touching—"Sweet heart, do you think I should be worthy of you if I shirked my duty?"

"No," returned Rotha, in a choked voice; "if you wish to leave me you must do so, I suppose."

"If I wish to leave you? Oh, Rotha, how can you say such things?" burst out the poor fellow, "when you know I worship the ground

you walk on !” How eloquent he could be, this great, clumsy Garton. “ Don’t make it too hard for me,” pleaded Gar; “ it is bad enough to have to go away, without leaving you sorry and caring for it.”

“ Would you have me not care? How cold it is out here!” shivered the girl. Her kerchief had come untied, and her brown hair blew softly over her neck; the pretty colour had faded out of her cheeks, she looked pale and wistful.

“ Perhaps we had better go in. I thought that red cloak would have kept you warm,” he returned, “ but these winds are so treacherous.” He followed her through the open glass doors; the robins were still chattering and twittering in the ivy. Rotha said nothing as Garton placed her favourite chair by the fire, and brought her a footstool; she sat with the red cloak dropping off from her shoulders and her hands folded wearily in her lap. Garton stood and watched her with that strange new heart-ache of his, till he saw the tears in her eyes, and then he could bear it no longer; he was standing beside her “ mountains high,” as she phrased it in her droll way, but now he suddenly got on one knee and put his arm around her. “ Don’t, Rotha—don’t, my dear girl,” he said—“ just as though he had been used to comfort her every day of her life,” Rotha said afterwards.

What were they after all but boy and girl, in

spite of their years? I don't think any one but Rotha would have thought much of Garton's eloquence, or of his clumsy attempts to cheer her, and yet she was as honestly comforted by it all as though he had used the most persuasive arguments.

They got up a figurative tableau of Millais' Huguenots after that, which was very striking and characteristic in its way: Rotha was for tying the white scarf round her lover's arm, but Garton would not hear of it for a moment. I think in her secret heart she was only trying him—very young women like to test their power sometimes; it did not offend Rotha one bit that he preferred his independence and his duty. Garton's firmness and loyalty to his brothers satisfied that duty-loving nature of hers. "How can they say he wants ballast?" she thought, indignantly, as she remembered the Vicar's grave warning.

She said something of this to Garton afterwards, when their little scene had been enacted; they were sitting now side by side, like sensible people, and Rotha looked as grave as a judge.

"I shouldn't have cared for you half so much, after all, if you had not been firm in this," she said to him; she looked at the young man with sweet serious eyes, in which there was more approval than pain. Garton, in spite of his heavy heart, thrilled at her praise.

"I thought you would feel so; I was certain of it," he replied, in a low voice.

"And you must not go and talk about it as though it were six years," continued Rotha, cheerfully, who did nothing by halves and was determined now to think the best of it. She was getting quite brave and matter-of-fact over it all; but such is the perversity of human nature, that Garton, though he came out so strong in the character of consoler, relapsed dismally at this juncture.

"I don't know about years; I think it will be an eternity to me," he rejoined, lugubriously. Oh, these lovers! what weathercocks they are. "It does seem so hard, just when we were going to be so happy, and Wednesday will be here in no time."

"Why, it is Friday now. Oh!" gasped Rotha—a sudden cold water damped her resolution and chilled it thoroughly. "Wednesday! how dreadfully near; couldn't they spare us another day?"

"It wouldn't do; besides, what's the good of prolonging one's misery? Not but what every hour is worth its weight in gold," returned Gar, somewhat contradictorily, feeling all at once like a condemned criminal waiting for a reprieve.

"No, it wouldn't do," returned Rotha, decisively, "we had better make the most of our time, and not spoil the little that remains to us;



perhaps it will be better for us both when you are once gone ; six months is not such a long time, after all, and then you know I shall expect plenty of letters."

"I am not a good hand at that, I am afraid," said Gar, with a rueful smile. "Robert is the letter-writer of the family. After all, Rotha, I am afraid that you will find out that you are cleverer than I."

The Vicar's very words. Another dash of cold water to Rotha.

"Never mind if I am," she returned, impatiently. "I don't think that sort of thing has anything to do with us two. You can write and tell me, I suppose, what you do on board ship, and what friends you make, and all that; and I daresay you will contrive a short message or two to Rube," she added, mischievously.

"Oh, I daresay I shall manage as much as that, and perhaps a little more. I can tell you, for instance——"

But it is useless repeating all Gar's words. Love-making was a novelty to him as well as to Rotha, and I daresay he said and did a hundred extravagant things. Robert's cool, quiet style would not have suited Gar's passionate nature at all.

Rotha thought it all very beautiful ; and then they set themselves to plan out the few days that remained to them. The Vicar had made Garton

promise that he would bring Rotha round to the vicarage in the course of the morning, and he further stipulated that she should remain there the rest of the day. This they both considered charming. The next morning Garton was under an engagement to accompany Robert to Stretton, where he was to talk over business and receive final orders from Mr. Ramsay. Robert was to stay at Stretton over Sunday, but Garton promised to take an early train, that he might spend at least an hour or two at Bryn. This day was as good as lost, Garton observed regretfully; but Rotha consoled him by telling him that they would be together all Sunday, and that he was to bring Rube up to tea. Likewise she yielded to his entreaties that Meg and she should do a morning's shopping in Thornborough on Monday, where Garton would be most of the day getting together necessities for his voyage. Robert had agreed to do the greater share of the business, and was hard at work already in Garton's service, as, indeed, were Mary and old Sarah; and, though they did not know it, he was at that very moment planning how he could stint himself to lay out a few more pounds on his brother's poor outfit.

"Yes; but we shall have to be back pretty early," observed Rotha, who was very brisk and businesslike over these details.

" You have not forgotten the party at the Rudelsheims ?"

Now the Rudelsheims were among the naturalized strangers appertaining to Blackscar and its environs. They were worthy folk of German extraction, and were rather favourites with the Vicarage people ; but they followed Mrs. Stephen Knowles's example in setting at defiance all Blackscar tradition, and in utterly abhorring the very name of tea-parties.

The tide of popular disfavour had indeed been too strong for that latter lady, who had succumbed so far as to tolerate kettledrums and to allow tea and thin bread-and-butter to be handed round at an unwholesome hour of the afternoon ; but Mrs. Rudelsheim, or Madame Rudelsheim, as she dearly loved to be called, would have nothing to say to such weak sophistries. She took every opportunity of laughing at Mrs. Stephen Knowles's "slop dawdles," as she called them.

" When I entertain my friends I will entertain them properly," she would say. " Dancing is good for young people, and I don't see why they should not have it." And, in accordance with this peremptory benevolence, the Rudelsheims issued invitations for a little party.

Rotha was going, but not Mary. Mrs. Ord had scruples about dancing—*theoretical*, but not

practical ones; but the Vicar had promised to look in during the evening, and Aunt Eliza had engaged to chaperone both Rotha and Nettie. Robert had an invitation, and so had Garton, and Rotha was extorting from the latter a reluctant promise to be there.

He was not in the mood for dancing, he said; and then there were other objections. Madame Rudelsheim's parties were rather grand affairs—at least in Gar's eyes. He could not tell Rotha very well that his dress coat was so shabby that he was ashamed of it, neither could he explain that even gloves and boots were a consideration to him. Gar never felt his poverty quite so bitterly as he did at this moment. If Rotha had been as poor as himself he would have confessed his difficulties without hesitation; but their hours together were numbered, and she had alleged all sorts of pretty arguments why he should be there, and Gar felt that in this point he was compelled to yield.

"And the next day—what shall we do the next day?" exclaimed Rotha, when this was settled. She looked just a little grave and tearful when Garton told her what they should do.

"It will be my last day," said Gar, sadly, "and I must spend it somehow with you and Rube: there will be packing and all manner of things to settle, I suppose, but I think we could manage to go over for a few hours to Burnley, you and I and Rube. I think that was the

happiest day I ever spent in my life, and I want to see the dear old spot once more."

"Yes, we will go," returned Rotha, dreamily, what strange fancies she had had in those dim old woods; she thought it was very nice of Garton to propose it. By this time it was growing late, and Rotha reminded him that Mary would be expecting them.

It was later still when they got to the Vicarage, for Meg came in, and that detained them; Garton looked sheepish again when Mrs. Carruthers shook hands with him and wished him joy; but he did not look sheepish when, a few minutes afterwards, Rotha and he walked down to the Vicarage. Mary was expecting them, and met her friend with open arms, but it was astonishing how little they said to each other. Rotha was seized with a fit of shyness, and remained quite dumb, and Mrs. Ord was almost as bad. "Oh! my dear. Dear Gar is not good enough for you," said the affectionate creature, in a voice between laughing and crying. "I don't care a bit for your hearing me," she continued, nodding at Garton, who was standing by looking shamefaced and happy, "if you love her you won't mind being told how good she is. Rotha, however shall we manage to make enough of you, and to think of it being Garton, after all," finished Mary, who was still in a highly strong pitch of excitement, and had kept up a

variation of this one particular sentence ever since the news had been told her.

Belle came down presently, while Mary and Rotha were still talking ; both of them absolutely started at her ghastly looks. She went up and kissed Rotha, with some show of kindness, but without any attempt at congratulation, and then went and sat silently in her place.

Only once Rotha attempted to speak to her—once when Garton, who had been lingering by her chair all the afternoon, had been summoned by the Vicar to come down and speak to a choir boy, who was in disgrace, and Mary, who had a secret liking for the culprit, had followed him. When they had gone out, Rotha crossed the room, and knelt down beside her.

“ Dear Belle,” she whispered, “ wont you wish me happiness ?—every one has but you.” She repented the speech the moment she had said it, when she saw the reproachful look with which she answered her.

“ Oh, Rotha, how can you?—do I look as though I could wish any one happiness ? No, I don’t mean that ; I do wish it you, dear, none the less that you have everything, and that my heart is broken ; and before Rotha could say a word, the unhappy girl had thrown her arms round Rotha’s neck in a burst of bitter weeping.



CHAPTER V.

IN HOC SPERO.

"Through my happy tears there look'd in mine
 A face as sweet as morning violets ;
 A face alight with love ineffable,
 The starry heart hid wonder trembling through."

MASSEY.

"To his eye
 There was but one beloved face on earth,
 And that was shining on him ; he had look'd
 Upon it till it could not pass away ;
 He had no breath, no being, but in hers ;
 She was his voice ; he did not speak to her,
 But trembled on her words ; she was his sigh,
 For his eye follow'd hers, and saw with hers,
 Which colour'd all his objects ;—he had ceased
 To live within himself ; she was his life,
 The ocean to the river of his thoughts,
 Which terminated all ; upon a tone,
 A touch of hers, his blood would ebb and flow,
 And his cheek change tempestuously."

BYRON.

BELLE's fit of agitation lasted so long that Rotha was frightened ; in vain she caressed her, in vain she implored her, with a hundred endearing expressions to tell her what had occurred to distress her. Belle would say nothing, and absolutely refused to be comforted. She had a paroxysm of coughing presently, and then she allowed Rotha to assist her to her own room, and do many little womanly

offices for her. She lay quite still, with heaving breast and closed eyes, while Rotha loosened her hair and freshened her burning face. But when she had finished, Belle put out her hand to her, and said, hoarsely—

“Don’t mind me—go now. Garton will be wanting you.”

“But I should like to stay with you,” returned Rotha, pityingly.

Belle shook her head.

“I would rather be alone—you know I must be alone sometimes. I shall like to think of you all being happy downstairs. You are too good to me, Rotha—I don’t deserve it; and I never think of any one but him.”

She looked up with quivering lips, when Rotha kissed her.

“Don’t tell any one; don’t let Mary know that I have been so silly—she would not understand—I shall be punished for it, for I shall not be able to come downstairs, and see him to-night.”

And a bitter sigh echoed her words as Rotha closed the door.

Rotha had no intention of obeying Belle by keeping her counsel. She found Mary alone when she returned to the drawing-room, and at once told her what had occurred, taking blame on herself for her inconsiderate words. Mrs. Ord, who looked very distressed over the

whole recital, relieved her at once by throwing quite another light on the matter.

She told Rotha that Robert had been in that morning, quite contrary to his usual custom, and finding Belle and her together, had told Belle, in her presence, about Garton's engagement, and his own appointment.

"Robert had behaved beautifully," Mrs. Ord added, "and had broken the double news very gently to Belle, who had, on the whole, seemed to have taken it very quietly. He put everything in a clear concise way, dwelt a little on the benefits of the large salary, and the comfortable house that awaited them; and then asked her in a quiet, straightforward way 'whether she thought she could get ready for him towards the end of February, or if she would prefer waiting till a few days before they sailed; unless, indeed,' he said, with that rare sweet smile of his, 'you are unwilling to leave Mary, and come with me so far.'"

He went on a little more after this, and then pressed gently for her answer. Neither of them could see Belle's face, for she kept her hand over her eyes all the time he talked. Once or twice she had shivered slightly, but for the most part she seemed keeping herself still by force. When he had finished she had uncovered her eyes, and looked at them so strangely that neither of them could understand it; and

there had been a strained worn look about her face that had gone to her sister's heart.

" You know I am not well enough. I don't think I shall ever be well enough to be married," she had said to them; and then calling her sister to her, " Mary, tell him I can't. Does he not know what is the matter with me?"

" I don't think any one knows what is the matter with you, Belle," he returned, but Mary saw a flushed uneasy look come into his face. Belle caught her breath with a little sob of impatient pain as he went on. No, she was not well, he knew that, he repeated, but she must give him her word to see a doctor without delay; and Belle, in a tone of reckless misery, promised that she would; and then she had surprised them both by fixing on Mr. Greenock, the Infirmary doctor. She would not hear of the family practitioner, Dr. Chapman.

" Very well, then, it shall be Greenock." Robert had returned, and, as far as he knew, he was quite as clever as the Blackscar practitioner. And then he begged her, smilingly, to compose herself, and to leave all other arrangements to him and Mary.

" And what did Belle say?" interrupted Rotha, breathlessly, at this point. She had turned red and pale over Mary's narration. She knew now why Belle had shrunk from the

look of her happy face. "Oh, Mrs. Ord, she cried, "I am so afraid that Belle thinks herself very ill, and that it is preying on her mind."

"That is what I think," returned Mary, drying her eyes. "I have told Austin so over and over again. Oh, Rotha, suppose this is the beginning of decline; she looks so like poor Aunt Isabel who had disease of her lungs, and died quite young. And then to think that Robert would not let you take her away."

"He does not understand," returned Rotha, in a low voice. "But I am afraid now a milder climate ought to have been tried long ago. I don't see myself how she is to be fit for a long sea voyage. But Mr. Greenock will tell you. Did she say anything more before she left you?"

"No; Austin came in, and she let us kiss her, but at the first word of congratulation she stopped us. Robert wanted her to go and lie down; he is very gentle and considerate with her now, and she went away directly. But I heard her tell Austin first that she had promised to see Mr. Greenock, and that he would tell us, what she had tried so often lately to tell us, only she could not. And as she said this, she turned so white that Austin put his arm round her, thinking she felt faint. But it was not faintness, Rotha, it was misery. She knows she is worse than we think."

"Why not send for Mr. Greenock at once?" interrupted Rotha, hastily, but Mary shook her head. It was hard to see Mrs. Ord's fair face so troubled and worn.

"No, it will not do to hurry it—we know Belle too well for that. She has promised to see him on Tuesday, and Robert will not be back from Stretton till then. Tuesday will be Garton's last evening too, and Wednesday will be Christmas-eve. Oh, Rotha, what a Christmas this will be for us all, if Mr. Greenock says that Robert will have to go alone!"

"He cannot leave her, surely?" interrupted Rotha.

"He must. What can he do? He will have thrown up his situation too. If she be not well enough to accompany him, the engagement will have to be broken off altogether, and that will kill her. Oh, Rotha," continued Mrs. Ord, remorsefully, "I did not mean to have said all this to-day. I was trying to forget it when you and Garton came in. Ah, my dear—my dear—you must not cry to-day, or all days, just when we all meant to be so happy too."

"I can't help it," returned Rotha, struggling with her tears. "It seems so dreadful for her, and then for him not to see it." She broke off suddenly as Garton re-entered the room, and after that nothing more was said between them.

This conversation damped the rest of the

evening to Rotha. Garton, though he sat near her, and talked to her, missed the old merry smiles. Rotha was grave and abstracted, almost sad ; Mary was upstairs with her sister most of the time, and the Vicar was busy. Robert never made his appearance at all. Just before she went away she stole for a moment into Belle's room to wish her good-night ; but Belle seemed weary, and hardly spoke to her, and with a heavy heart she crept away. The next day things were hardly more cheerful at the Vicarage ; Robert and Garton had gone to Stretton. Belle had relapsed into one of her taciturn moods, and Mary, after a few attempts, hardly made an effort to be cheerful ; she was very sympathetic, however, and had a long confidential talk with Rotha about her own prospects. And in the afternoon, the Vicar seeing how things were, put aside his own business and took them and the four boys for a country ramble, which lasted so long that Garton had already made his appearance at Bryn, and was harassing the soul of Mrs. Carruthers by his restlessness and repeated expressions of wonder as to what had become of Rotha.

The walk had done its work thoroughly, and Rotha came in by-and-by just as Garton loved to see her, with her brown hair ruffled, and her bright face freshened with the wind. She had brought them all in, in triumph with her, and Mary

laughed, and looked like her old self as she helped Mrs. Carruthers make arrangements for so large a party. Rotha let her do it, she stood talking to Garton in a low voice till she was summoned to her place at the head of the table.

These sort of impromptu gatherings were Rotha's delight. She had sent off Guy to fetch Reuben, and when he returned with the lad, her pleasure was complete. Garton indeed would have preferred having Rotha to himself—love-making and tender speeches were hardly possible before the lads. But Rotha, in her unselfishness, never thought of such a thing ; she was quite content to beam at Garton at intervals across the boys' rosy faces. She talked more to the Vicar than to him, it made her shy to encounter several pairs of round curious eyes, every time she addressed them. Rufus and Laurie were always telegraphing their astonishment to each other, and Arty's audible remarks made her desperate ; she wished Garton would not break off his conversation every minute to catch her faintest words, he did all sorts of things, this clumsy lover of hers, that confused and put her out of countenance. The Vicar could not help admiring the graceful tact with which she checked, and kept him in order. After tea, when Mary had stolen away to look after Belle, she taught the boys games, and made them happy in a dozen ways. She played and sang to them, and made them

join in some of their favourite glees ; but through it all, she was always conscious that Garton was near her, or following her about with wistful eyes.

She went into the long drawing-room once, in the moonlight, to put away some music, and there she was startled by seeing him, standing between the marble pillars, like a black shadow. “ Oh, Garton,” she said, “ I did not know you were following me. How you startled me.” And then, as he did not answer, she went up to him, and touched him on the arm.

“ Come, Garton, the boys are going. I think the Vicar wants you.”

“ Let him want me,” returned Garton, detaining her. “ Rotha, do you know that you have hardly spoken to me this evening. I have been almost jealous of those boys — Rube especially.”

“ Rube, your favourite ? Oh, for shame, Garton !”

“ My dear, I suppose it is only natural. I have so few hours left to me, and they will see you day after day.” He held her fast for a moment, as though under some strange agitation. “ Rotha, put your little hand here a moment,” and he held it firmly to his heart. “ Do you know, dear, it aches so to-night, that I can hardly bear it.”

She looked up in his face almost frightened.

Was it fancy, or did the moonlight make him look so pale?

"My dear Garton—my poor boy!"

He smiled at that.

"I cannot help it, dear; it is a sort of feeling—a presentiment—I suppose. People are always talking about those sort of things; and perhaps it has come to me. I can't get it out of my mind, that it would be better for us both if I were not going away."

"Oh, Garton!"

"There, perhaps I ought not to have said that. These things are always in God's hands, and I am doing my duty. You remember what you said about putting 'the hand to the plough.' There must be no looking back in one's work, eh, Rotha?"

"No; but I don't know how I am to let you go," said Rotha, remorsefully, feeling that she had not made enough of him. She heard the boys tramping out of the front door, but for ever she had forgotten her duties as hostess. "Oh, Gart, if you talk like this I shall never be able to let you go."

"Yes you will," he returned, with that wonderful new gentleness which had come to him in the last few days and which reminded her of the Xmas. "I don't fear you, Rotha. You are the bravest girl I have ever seen. You would be



me go, if you knew that I should never come back to you."

"Dear Garton, do you think I would be so hard-hearted?"

"It would not be hard-heartedness, Rotha; but perhaps I shall never make you understand, any more than you would if I told you that I loved you a hundred times more than you loved me."

"No, indeed," returned Rotha, rather indignant at this admission.

"Nevertheless it would be the truth," he returned, quietly. "I have watched you so much these two days, and I know you so well, dear—don't misunderstand me," he continued, with a touch of his old vehemence, as Rotha tried to draw away her hand, "I am not complaining—why should I? It could not be otherwise. The time may come—I don't say it will, Rotha—when you will give me all that is in you to give; but it will not come to me just yet. Hush! Is that Austin calling?"

"He is only speaking to Mrs. Carruthers. Garton, what makes you talk so strangely tonight? Have I done anything to hurt you?"

"Hurt me, my darling?" But she need not have asked the question, for his answer fully satisfied her.

"What a grand room this is, Rotha," he

said, presently, when they were still standing gazing out in the moonlighted lawn. " You look too young to be the mistress of this great house; and to think that it all belongs to you!"

" Do you mind it?" she returned, softly. " I am keeping it all for you and your brother."

" For me!" He absolutely started. A sudden film came before his eyes. I don't think he ever realized before that all these good things were to come to him.

" Yes; but we must not forget Robert," said Rotha, following out the unspoken thought.

" Do you mean you and I? No, we will not forget him. You must not think me strange or ungrateful, Rotha; but it almost oppresses me to think that I may possibly share all this some day; it does not seem right or true. I wonder," he paused, looking round him with strange, unseeing eyes; and then he stooped and kissed her softly once or twice.

What was that dull pain beating at his heart—that shadow that darkened his face with subtle trouble, and which haunts him even now?—what though he never dwell here—in the presence of the woman he loves? " In thy Father's house there are many mansions" for thee, and such as thou, Garton Ord.

The next day was Sunday. It was one of

those soft wintry days which seemed snatched from the early spring. The robins chirped busily in the ivy ; here and there a snowdrop peeped out from the ground. The sea was all in a glitter again, with a maze of deep blue shadow. Rotha, in soft blue dress, looked perfectly in unison with the day itself, as Garton thought, as he came through the lich-gate to join her after service.

Rotha long afterwards looked back on that day as one of the most peaceful she had ever spent. Garton had lost that feverish restlessness which had somehow oppressed her, in spite of herself. He was a little quieter than she had ever known him, but full of thoughtfulness for her and Reuben. Reuben came up to Bryn by Rotha's express desire ; and the three spent the afternoon together in the old way.

But once, when Garton and she were left alone together, he said, suddenly—

“ I have been thinking, Rotha, that I should like to leave you a little keepsake, and I have nothing in the world but my mother's keeper. It is very old-fashioned, and hardly worthy of your acceptance ; but I should like you to wear it, dear, when I am away.” And Rotha changed colour very prettily as he slipped the quaint old ring on her finger.

Nothing more was said for a few minutes, and then Rotha asked Garton if he did not like the

old German custom of exchanging rings at a betrothal.

"There is a ring upstairs among your aunt's treasures that I should like you to wear, for my sake," she said, quickly; and before Garton could answer her she had left the room, and shortly after returned with the little case in her hand. She blushed a little as she held it out to him. "Look here, Garton; this ring always reminded me of you, somehow, and you must wear it as a kind of talisman, to preserve you from danger. When you are lonely and homesick you can look at it, and think of me."

"But it is too beautiful. Oh, Rotha, how can you?—and after my poor old keeper too!" he returned, in a broken voice.

Garton was right as to its beauty, for the ring was of a singular design, and almost unique of its kind. In the centre was a recumbent cross formed of tiny rose diamonds set round with blue enamel, and graven on the broad gold band itself were the words, "In hoc spero"—in this I hope.

Garton kissed the glittering cross reverently as Rotha put it on, and there were tears in his eyes as he thanked her. "In hoc spero," Rotha heard him whisper, once or twice. "I wish all crosses were as light to carry as this;" and once, very solemnly, "Dear, you are right, and the Cross is the only talisman."



The next morning Garton was under an appointment to meet his brother at Thornborough; and according to promise Rotha and Meg set out also for a day's shopping. Rotha was in hopes that Mary would accompany her, but at the last minute the Vicar came round to say that Mrs. Ord was unwilling to leave her sister. This damped the expedition a little; but as Rotha had a great deal of business to transact, she started reluctantly without her. She got through all her commissions before Garton was at liberty to come in search of her. As they walked through the smoky streets or looked in at the shop-windows for the trifling gifts that Garton proposed to buy for Mary and the boys, they met Robert once or twice, evidently bent on more important errands of his own; but he barely noticed the little party, beyond lifting his hat to the ladies, and Rotha was certain that he was anxious to avoid coming into direct contact with them.

When he had passed, however, Garton had plenty to say in his brother's praise; he told her that without doubt Robert was stinting himself that he might procure comforts for his journey. Robert had been in with him to the different shops, and ordered things almost lavishly. He had attempted to remonstrate with him once or twice, but Robert only answered that he meant to do his uttermost.

"I don't think I have ever had so many things in my life before," finished Garton, who knew nothing about the handsome travelling dressing-case and writing-case, with his initials stamped in silver on the Russian leather. Mary knew all about it, and so did the Vicar; but Rotha's desire was that they should be slipped into the bottom of the box, and only be brought to light as a pleasant surprise on the voyage.

Rotha went into the Vicarage on their return, and found Mary already marking some of Garton's new things. A heavy travelling-trunk blocked up the passage; Garton pointed it out rather sadly as they went through the hall. "Forty-eight hours more, and I shall be on my way," he observed, with a sigh, which Rotha was only too ready to echo.

It was arranged that Garton was to come up to Bryn and wait for Rotha, while the carriage went to fetch Aunt Eliza and Nettie; but Rotha, who had put off dressing for the party till an unconscionably late hour, was not nearly ready when he arrived; and to beguile his impatience he sent up all sorts of messages by Mrs. Carruthers, to Prue's and Catherine's great amusement.

Meg gave ludicrous accounts of Garton pacing up and down like a Polar bear, in white gloves; his hair was just a quarter of an inch long, Meg protested; and she was sure that Madame Rudelsheim would take him for an

escaped convict. "And he has holes in his gloves already through fidgeting them, Rotha; and he looks such a giant in his dress-coat." Rotha burst out laughing at the flattering picture.

"There, give me my fan and gloves—do, you ridiculous woman," laughed Rotha. "I must go down now, and ask if I shall do."

She went rustling into the room in her pink dress—her white neck and arms showing through the folds of some flimsy scarf. She burst into the presence of the astonished Garton radiant and smiling. Wonderful pearls gleamed on her neck. She wore glittering armlets and serpents with brilliant heads. She stood tapping the ground before him with her satin slipper.

"Shall I do, Garton?" she said. "I have put on some of the old jewels in your honour to-night." She laughed at the awe and reverence with which the young man seemed to regard her. A hot flush crossed Garton's face as he answered. Rotha sparkling with jewels seemed different from the Rotha in the grey dress and blue ribbons. He could not make her understand this, but in his humility he seemed to be suddenly removed miles away from her. What could there be in common between such as he and the radiant girl before him?

Garton did not say all this—he would not have known how—but he looked at her with grave, wistful eyes.

"How will you do? Don't ask me. I don't know you to-night, Rotha. Are those Aunt Charlotte's pearls you have got on?" He glanced anxiously at her hand to see if the old keeper was there, but it was half-hidden under a glittering diamond hoop.

"Don't you like me to wear them? aren't you pleased?" asked Rotha. She felt disappointed and half ready to cry. She was a thorough woman, and wanted her lover to admire her. She wished Garton would not stand looking at her with such big, solemn eyes. Perhaps he thought that a future clergyman's wife had no business to wear jewels. She moved her bracelet up and down her arm so restlessly that it unsnapped, and Garton had to come to the rescue with bungling fingers. He looked at her in a queer, uncertain way when his clumsy hands had achieved the clasp.

"I was half afraid that I should be kept at arm's length this evening. I can't believe that you belong to me to-night, dear," he said, wistfully. It was this humility, this self-distrust, that was Garton's great stumbling-block in Rotha's eyes; another time she would have waxed a little impatient over it, but now it only pained her. She drew back from him with tears in her eyes; in a moment she felt both chilled and wounded. After what she had done for him—how could he—how could he!

Rotha was too gentle to retaliate, but Garton felt the silent reproach instinctively; in another moment he was beside her.

"Oh, Rotha, I did not mean that! How could you misunderstand me? Sweet heart, dear heart, how can you be what you are and not be deserving of my reverence?"

But Rotha's answer was right womanly.

"I would rather be loved, Garton."

"Well, and are you not?" But the rest of his reply must have been tolerably satisfactory to Rotha, to judge by the happy blush and smile with which she answered him.

Madame Rudelsheim's handsome rooms were in a blaze of light, and dancing had long commenced when Rotha and her party entered. To Rotha it was a dazzling spectacle; she leaned on Garton's arm, a little confused and giddy: the whirling couples, the lights, the music, the brilliant dresses—that is to say, brilliant for Blackscar—the small knots of chaperones and wallflowers nodding like well-preserved exotics against the wall, the conservatory with its compound lights, a blending of Chinese-lanterns and moonlight, were like the shifting of a kaleidoscope to Rotha, whose sole notion of a party was derived from the breaking-up at Miss Binks's, where the young ladies were all dressed in a uniform of white muslin, and dancing was carried on to the limited hour of eleven.

"How beautiful it all is! Don't you like parties?" asked Rotha, with little gasps of admiration. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks glowed; how pleasant it was to be there, among all those people, leaning on his arm: she moved away from him a little reluctantly when her partner, handsome George Effingham, came to claim her. As for Garton, he might have been in earnest, he glared at him so; Gar could not dance. He went off rather sulkily with Rotha's flowers in his hand. He stood by Aunt Eliza's side, rearing himself against the wall in a thoroughly English-like bad humour; the poor flowers rather suffered for it. Rotha came up for them and her fan presently—rather to George Effingham's surprise. He half believed Jack's account was true, after all. Gar gave them without a word; as far as that went, he was quite content to fetch and carry for her all the evening. He had her scarf, a scented gauzy thing, hanging conspicuously over his arm; nay, under other circumstances he would have been quite happy to have stood in a corner all the evening and watched her—his Lady of delight; but he could not help feeling hurt and sulky when one gay partner after another whirled her away. Rotha was much sought after, and it was only natural, but perhaps it was trying for Garton. George Effingham in particular became abhorrent to him—probably because he was the handsomest man in the room, and danced

often with Rotha. Gar longed to go after him, and tell him that she belonged to him. Before the evening was half over, the impulse was strong upon him to make his claims known to the whole room ; he leant against the wall hour after hour buttoning and unbuttoning his huge gloves, or pulling the fronds of maidenhair out of Rotha's bouquet. He stood like a stony young giant, when Rotha innocently brought up her partners to him, and frowned heavily over the graceful badinage as though every joke were treason to his love. I think after a little while, Aunt Eliza would have gladly dispensed with his close attendance—he trampled on her rich silk dress, and answered all her cheerful remarks with monosyllables. He burst into a gruff laugh when Aunt Eliza feared that he was not enjoying himself, and then checked himself with a twinge of remorse.

"No, I am not, but she is," he said, in a tone that told Aunt Eliza everything. "Doesn't she look beautiful?—just fit for this sort of thing," he burst out after a moment. "Of course every one admires her—no one else in the room can hold a candle to her; and then how gracefully she dances."

"Why don't you take her in to supper?" said Aunt Eliza, nodding at him till her brown front got slightly disarranged. "Of course, I see how it is: you should not let that George Effingham

monopolize her: he is handsome, but he is no good—more whiskers than brains; there's Nettie there won't say a word to him."

"He—I hate him—that is—— Confound his impertinence! there he is making up to her again. I beg your pardon, Miss Underwood, but there are some things a fellow can't stand." And with these obscure remarks Garton threaded his wrathful way through the dancers, to where Rotha sat fanning herself, with the obnoxious George Effingham leaning over her.

Garton almost pushed against him as he held out his hand to her.

"Come, Rotha," he said, "they are going down to supper now, and I want to get you a good place."

"Miss Maturin has accepted my escort, I believe," lisped young Effingham with a twirl of his moustache, and with what he intended to be a fascinating smile.

"I beg your pardon, Effingham," retorted Gar, "Miss Maturin is engaged to me for this. You promised, you remember, Rotha?" with a change of tone so meaning and tender that it was not lost on the watchful rival. Rotha coloured a little as she answered—

"Yes, I remember; but I thought you had forgotten me. You seemed so engrossed with Aunt Eliza. You see you must excuse me, Mr. Effingham, but I shall be ready for our next dance."

"That is, if Mr. Ord will allow us. I had no idea that I was interfering with a monopoly," he returned, with a perceptible sneer. It was lost on Garton, however, as he hurried Rotha away.

"How often have you been dancing with that fellow?" inquired Garton, hastily. "I hate him! None of the Effinghams are any good, I can tell you."

"Hush! dear, he is behind us—he will hear you. He dances very nicely—that is all I know. Don't let us talk about him. I am so glad to get back to you." And Rotha looked so honest and so genuinely happy as she said this that Garton was instantly mollified, and all his sulkiness vanished under the magic of her smiles.

That hour was the one oasis of the evening to Gar, the rest was a splendid blank; and he roused himself to such purpose and was so devoted and attentive that it was sufficiently patent to every one at their end of the table how things stood between them. I suppose nothing is perfect in this world, and there is always a cause for discontent to leak out; such is the contradictoriness of human nature, and female human nature in particular, that Rotha wished that his manner to her had not been quite so *empressé*, and that he would not look at her so often. How she hated herself for this feeling afterwards; but it made her a little quiet at the time—

perhaps because she was aware that George Effingham still watched them from a distance. How glad she was that there was no room for him at their table.

He came up by-and-by to claim her for the Lancers. Rotha, who was drawing on her gloves, was very cool and dignified all of a sudden, but she rose without a word.

"Do put on your scarf, Rotha; it is so cold and draughty in the passages," said Garton, following her. Rotha bit her lip with something like vexation at this unwelcome pertinacity.

"No, no, I don't want it; give it to Aunt Eliza to hold if you are tired of it," she said, impatiently. How she wished afterwards she had spared him this rebuff.

He went off sadly enough after that. As he passed through the hall there was a sudden loud ring at the door-bell, and a moment afterwards he was shivering in a draught of cold night-air.

"I suppose a carriage has arrived for some one; I wish it were ours," muttered Gar, disconsolately; and half in curiosity he turned back to question the waiter, the very green-grocer in disguise who was at all the Blackscar parties, and who rejoiced in the mellifluous appellation of Gubbins.

"Gubbins, was that the carriage from Bryn?"

"Carriage, sir? no, sir! I was just coming

to find you, sir. Your brother, sir"—motioning to a small apartment where hats and coats had been multiplying and dividing all the evening, under the care of a large-headed youth with water on the brain, in a suit of tight livery—"him, sir—your brother, sir, wanted you fetched immediately."

"All right, Gubbins, that will do. It is I, Garton. Come in here, my dear fellow; I want to speak to you." And Robert, taking hold of Garton's arm, gently led him into the little room, and shut the door.

CHAPTER VI.

"GOOD-BYE, GAR."

"Glitters the dew and shines the river,
Up comes the lily and dries her bell ;
But two are walking apart for ever,
And wave their hands for a mute farewell.
* * * * *

"And yet I know, past all doubting, truly—
A knowledge greater than grief can dim—
Know, as he loved, he will love me truly—
Yea, better—e'en better than I love him.

"And as I walk by the vast calm river,
The awful river so dread to see,
I say, 'Thy breadth and thy depth for ever
Are bridged by his thoughts that cross to me.'"

JEAN INGELOW.

MEANWHILE Rotha went through the Lancers somewhat languidly ; and for once George Effingham's gay chatter fell unheeded on his partner's ear. Rotha was absent, a little *distraite*—she was wondering what had become of Garton, and why he had not followed her into the room. Aunt Eliza was still in her old corner, talking in a loud voice to a very sulky young wallflower, who wished she would not, and gave her small cool answers in return. Nettie was carrying on a violent flirtation with a stout, bald-headed widower, old enough to be her father, and the



happy parent of nine; and Mat O'Brien, in an audible voice, was telling Mrs. Stephen Knowles that the thing was as good as settled. How flat, stale, and unprofitable these sort of affairs were, after all. Everybody was enjoying themselves, it was true—except the chaperones, who were just getting drowsy. But Rotha began to be a little tired of it all. The lights were not quite so bright; the flowers were faded, the music had degenerated into a mere jig. George Effingham's talk was tedious. Rotha looked wistfully across to the empty corner, but no stony young giant blocked it up, no dark eyes followed her up and down the room; no wonder her dancing was spiritless, and that her unlucky partner got short answers.

“I wonder where he is? how I wish this dance were over! I am afraid that he has not enjoyed the evening as much as I have,” thought Rotha, with an undefinable feeling of remorse, as she remembered that she might have given up at least one dance to stay with him; and then she resolved mentally that George Effingham should not again tempt her. She had been angry with him ever since his speech as to Garton's monopoly; and then Garton, dear old fellow! did not seem to like him.

“It is your turn now; ladies to the centre,” breaks in the irrepressible George. “It is a bore, you know, and all that sort of thing”—

and he shrugs his shoulders slightly, and walks to his place, looking handsome and used-up. "Ah, there's our monopolizing friend," he continues presently, with a cool, well-bred stare, which Rotha immediately resents; but she looks up very eagerly notwithstanding.

Yes, he was right; there was Garton making his way towards them, pushing through the dancers with a pale, determined face. Rotha's flowers are all to pieces now, strewn hither and thither as his strong shoulders parts the crowd.

"I don't congratulate you on your choice of a bouquet-holder, Miss Maturin," says George Effingham, caressing his whiskers, to hide a smile. "Ladies to the centre again, if you please."

Garton makes a hasty stride, and lays his hand on her arm, her dress, anywhere.

"Rotha, I want you."

"Presently," she says, with a smile; and she goes up and makes strange fluttering movements with three other ladies. Garton watches the grave profound salaams with a mixture of contempt and impatience. "Hands across!" Rotha is back in her place again, and now the gentlemen perform mysterious evolutions, and turn their backs disdainfully on each other.

"Oh, Rotha, do leave all this nonsense. I want you," says Gar, trying to speak steadily. His face is very pale indeed by this time; he looks like one who has received a shock.

“How can I come in the middle of a dance? Is anything the matter? Has our carriage come? How strange you look, Garton!”

“There is nothing the matter; at least I shall have to go home alone if you will not come. I am wanted directly,” says Gar, in an agitated manner.

“I don’t know what you mean. Of course I will come if you want me,” returned Rotha, quite bewildered. “I am afraid something is the matter, Mr. Effingham, and I must go home. There is Annie Johnson without a partner. Shall I tell Aunt Eliza we are going, Garton?”

“No; leave her alone, she will only be in our way. We can send back the carriage with a message presently. I am so sorry to disturb you, dear, but it could not be helped.” And Gar looks at her with such sad eyes that Rotha feels quite frightened.

“But what is it? and why must we go home?” she inquires, pressing his arm. The music sounds softly in the distance. There is a sweet, overpowering smell from a daphne near. The Chinese lanterns have burnt out in the conservatory, and the moonlight pours in unchecked. She detains Garton by the door, but he draws her on.

“Hush! I can’t tell you here, they are all coming in. I don’t think I quite understand how it is myself, though he has been telling me.

I only know that I am to leave you directly." Then, with a sudden burst of despair, " Oh, whatever shall I do without you, Rotha, my darling?"

" Leave me directly?" cries Rotha, with a start. Her hand tightens insensibly on his arm. " Oh, my dear boy, do tell me plainly what you mean."

" Hush! there's Robert. It means that I am going now, this morning, and not to-morrow evening, as we thought. Ask Bob to explain it; it is more than I can." And Gar's face worked with agitation.

Rotha gave a little exclamation when she saw Robert, but I don't think he heard it. He looked a little moved from his usual calmness when he saw her coming in on Garton's arm. Undefinable feelings of remorse chilled him, a nameless pain smote upon his heart, as he marked her clinging gesture. How young and fair she looked in her evening dress. Jewels too! He always knew how well she would look in jewels. How milky-white the pearls were against her soft neck! but the clear eyes looked up at him sorely troubled. He saw quicker than Garton too that she was trembling. He came up to her, with what Mary called " his good look on his face."

" This is a sad business. I am so sorry for you and Garton. It is all the fault of those

telegraph clerks that the mistake has occurred. Do sit down ;” for she was trembling more than ever at his kindness. “ Garton, my dear fellow,” with a touch of impatience at his brother’s dilatoriness, “ why don’t you give Miss Maturin a chair ?”

“ Thank you. I am very silly ; but——”

“ But Gar was too sudden. Yes, I understand ; that was always his fault, dear old boy.” He sent Garton off with prompt thoughtfulness for Rotha’s wraps, and then poured out some wine and brought it to her, putting it to her lips himself. Tears came to Rotha’s eyes at this. She was a little giddy and stunned at the quick transition of events. She was tired, too ; and this was the first kindly office he had ever rendered her. Of course Robert misunderstood her emotion, but he was not the less kind.

When Garton brought the furred cloak, he took it from him and wrapped her in it himself. In trying to fasten it, his hand accidentally touched hers, and with a sudden kindly impulse he took it for a moment in his, as though to detain her. Did she remember, even at that moment, that it was the first time their hands had ever met? If so, I do not think that mended her agitation.

“ There is no hurry—at least not till you are ready. Was I right in thinking you would come with us to the Vicarage ?”

"Do they expect me?" asked Rotha.

"Yes, Mary does; and so does Austin, I believe. If you are really ready, there is no time to be lost." And Rotha rose immediately.

"How soon must he go?" she said, presently, when they were in the carriage. Garton's hand had already felt for hers in the darkness, but he had not trusted himself to speak, and Robert's sympathy kept him silent.

"In little more than an hour," he replied. "You know we have to go to Stretton first, and then he is to take the six o'clock train to London; of course I shall go with him, and see him on board. They expect to drop anchor about four."

"But why—what is the reason of all this hurry?" persisted Rotha, with dry lips. She leant back in the carriage, too confused and giddy to follow the explanation that Robert gave her. I don't think she ever understood more than that it had been a mistake in a telegraphic message as to the time the vessel was to leave the docks, and that it had been rectified too late. Robert had arrived from Stretton a little before midnight, and had found the Vicar and his wife up. Mary was hard at work at some of Garton's things, and he had stayed to explain matters and put everything in train before he set off to find Garton. By these means very little time had been lost, for Garton was so bewildered by

this sudden parting with Rotha, that his arrangements were hardly to be depended on.

Yet even though their very minutes were numbered he could not bring himself to speak to her, but the convulsive pressure of the hand he held spoke volumes; once, somewhat alarmed at his continued silence, Rotha put up her other hand and touched his face in the darkness, and then she felt something very like a tear on his cheek. “My poor boy—my own poor boy!” she whispered. But Garton only said, “Hush! don’t be too kind to me to-night—I cannot bear it; it will unman me.” And then kissed the caressing hand humbly, as though to atone for his words.

It seemed a long drive to all three, before they were set down at the Vicarage. The Vicar was in the dining-room awaiting them; a bright fire burned cheerily; breakfast was already laid on the table, and Deb came up with the steaming coffee-pot soon afterwards. Short as was the interval that had elapsed since Robert had left them, Mary and Deb had already got through half the packing, and Garton’s presence was urgently required for its completion.

“We have brought Miss Maturin,” said Robert, leading her in. “I thought you would take care of her, Austin, while Gar and I finish going through the papers. I will bring him back as soon as possible,” he added, gently, as he placed

Rotha by the fire. Tired and sick as she felt, she could not help giving him a grateful look; its sweetness lingered long with him through the wretched time that followed. He could not fail to remember afterwards that she had acquitted him of blame.

Rotha sat quietly by the fire after the brothers had left the room. Gar had given her one long, wistful look as he went out. Highly as the Vicar esteemed her, he never fully realized her gentleness and unselfishness till this moment. Robert's kindness had roused her from the bewildered state into which Garton's agitation had thrown her, and she was now quite collected and full of thought for them all.

"Don't mind me," she said to the Vicar, as he hovered near her anxiously. "We shall have plenty of time to think of ourselves and our own loss afterwards. Do go to Garton. I am sure he wants all the help you can give him." And as he quitted her reluctantly, she followed him and begged him to be sure and tell Mary to put her presents just inside the trunk that he might see them the moment he opened it.

When she was left alone she cast about in her own mind how she might comfort him. She would hardly have a minute to exchange a word with him, perhaps; and then the others would be with them. And yet she longed to say some such word of comfort to him.



There was a little worn Testament which she always carried about with her, and which had belonged to her mother, and her name and her mother's name had been written in it. After a moment's hesitation, she thought that would do, and sat down with trembling fingers to pencil a few words on the title-page. The effort made the tears spring to her eyes, but she wiped them courageously away : “ It will never do for him to see that I have been crying,” she thought ; but notwithstanding the resolution, one or two drops blurred the handwriting. Garton afterwards read these few tender words, the noblest farewell that any lover could pen :—“ The Lord watch between me and thee when we are absent one from another.—Your faithful friend, ROTHA MATURIN.” How many Mizpahs are set up between loving hearts in this our earthly wilderness !

After that she sat herself down again with the book on her lap, and patiently awaited their return ; Robert came in first and began arranging and sorting some papers ; he looked up a little surprised when Rotha rose suddenly from her seat and offered to help him. “ No, no, you are too tired,” he began, but at her reiterated request he gave way : she stood beside him following his directions with a quiet intelligence that won his good opinion. She never asked after Garton, or seemed the least impatient till he returned. Robert gave her more than one curious look of

mingled admiration and pity, when she was too much engaged to notice it. The white fur cloak, the starry flowers in her hair, and the ungloved hands, sparkling with rings, all came under his notice ; but, most of all, the wistful young face with its quiet air of sadness, and its patient droop of the head.

The Vicar came in next, and then Garton in his dark tweed travelling suit, and afterwards Mary, who came round and kissed Rotha without a word, and then began pouring out the coffee. Mary looked as though she had been crying, and there were dark lines under the pretty eyes, but she spoke with her old cheerfulness now and then, or as the Vicar would have said, "Polly was all there." The rest gathered round the table and made some pretence at a meal, as though to set Garton an example ; but he told them he had already supped, and only wanted a cup of coffee. Rotha made him break bread, however, and then he sat for a long time with his hand drawn silently over his eyes. He started up presently from his place as though he had forgotten something.

"Rube—I have not wished my poor Rube good-bye."

"There is no time now," returned Robert ; "besides, the whole house is asleep."

"Yes, I know ;" and Garton sat down again with a heavy sigh. "No one thought of rousing

him I suppose? and now it is too late. Oh, Rube, Rube,” he went on, in an agitated voice, “it will break your heart, boy, to wake up to-morrow and find me gone.”

“No, no—nonsense, Gar!” said Robert, with a touch of kind peremptoriness; but Rotha stopped him. She put her hand gently on the young man’s arm.

“You can trust him to me Garton, can you not? I will go to him to-morrow myself, and if he frets I will take him home. You know he belongs to me now as well as to you.”

“Trust him to her?” Rotha might well treasure the smile with which he answered her; the rugged brown face worked and softened with conflicting feelings. “Come, Mary, I am ready to go up and wish Belle and the boys good-bye.”

“Go, my dear fellow; we have only seven minutes,” called out Robert, and Gar nodded in answer. Rotha had slipped the little Testament in his hand as they sat at the table; he had a choked sort of feeling that his good-bye would be as mute as hers when it came to the point; he hardly understood himself what the bitter ache at his heart meant, but it almost suffocated him.

Arty was fast asleep in his cot, and murmured drowsily in answer to his uncle’s kiss; he had all the contents of his Noah’s Ark littered on the coverlet, and the elephant, and a cassowary re-

posed on his pillow. Gar leant over the little fellow fondly. The other boys had been roused at the last moment by Deb, and sat shivering and miserable on the respective edges of their beds, especially Laurie, who began to cry. Garton kissed them and bade God bless them one after another, and sent his dear love to Rube; and then he went to Belle, who was waiting up for him.

Belle had never got on very well with Garton, and Mary was surprised to see how much she seemed affected at saying good-bye to him; she turned quite pale as he leant over to kiss her.

"Good-bye, dear Belle; get well soon, and marry Robert." And Belle folded her arms round his neck, just as though he had been her brother.

"Good-bye, dear old Gar. Forgive me for having been so often cross with you. I never meant to be so, dear; I always loved you, Gar."

"And I you, dear. There—there is Robert calling me, and I must go to Rotha. Don't come down with me, Mary; better not, better not. Oh, Mary!"—and he leant against the half-closed door with whitening face—"Mother Mary! I feel as though I shall never come home again, and as though this were good-bye for ever."

"Gar! Gar! don't let Belle hear you, my darling boy; this is very, very wrong." And Mary put her hand tenderly on the dark, closely-cropped hair.



“I can’t help it, Mary. Hark! is that Austin’s voice? Good-bye, dear Sister; take care of her for my sake.”

“You have only two minutes, Garton; Robert is having the luggage put on the fly—go in to Rotha, my dear boy.” And the Vicar put his hand on his shoulder and led him gently in.

“Not good-bye,” said Rotha, putting her soft hand over his mouth, as though to silence him; “not good-bye. I like farewell so much better.”

“Farewell then,” returned Garton, taking her in his arms; “farewell, and God bless you. If I kiss this dear face for the last time, His will be done.”

“My own Garton,” murmured the girl, putting back her head that she might look at him; “my own Garton, you do not fear to go now, do you? You would not have it otherwise?”

“No, not otherwise,” he repeated; and the mournful steadfastness of his look haunted her long afterwards; it reminded her much of a martyr’s look. “Not otherwise while I have this talisman.” He held up his ring that she might see the glittering cross, “In hoc spero.” “Beloved, that must be our motto;” and before she could answer, he closed her fair face suddenly between his hands. For a brief moment she heard the beating of his heart, and his whispered “God bless you!” another minute his hand was within the Vicar’s grasp. And then he was gone.

“Good-bye Gar! oh, good-bye Gar!” Well may the Vicar re-enter the house with slow, thoughtful step and the shadow of a sudden pain, and go into the room where Rotha is kneeling with her face in Mary's lap; and well may Mary's face be wet with newly-shed tears. Six months is not a long time, and the world is not so large after all, yet it may be the shadow of an eternal parting is darkening around them; it may be that the old places may know the face of Garton Ord no more. What then? Loving hearts weeping over the sepulchre of a dead hope? *In hoc spero.* Yea, in this be your hope.

CHAPTER VII.

ROBERT ORD'S REPENTANCE.

" How sweet is woman's love, is woman's care !
 When struck and shatter'd in a stormy hour
 We droop forlorn ! and man, with stoic air,
 Neglects, or roughly aids ; then robed in power,
 Then nature's angel seeks the mourner's bower.
 How blest her smile that gives the soul repose,
 How blest her voice, that, like the genial shower
 Pour'd on the desert, gladdens as it flows,
 And cheers the smiling heart and conquers woes."

GALLY KNIGHT.

THE next day was a blank, as far as Rotha was concerned.

It was daybreak before the Vicar had taken her home; and then she had dragged herself wearily to her bed, too tired and dispirited with the evening's strain to do more than fall asleep with Garton's name on her lips. She woke late the following morning, and opened her eyes on a wet, cheerless prospect—on dripping trees, sea-fog, and all the depressing accompaniments of a hopelessly rainy day; her head ached too, and she felt stiff and jaded with the unaccustomed exercise of the previous evening. She would have liked to have been where she was another hour or two, reviving the bitter-sweet

memories of last night—their happy evening together, the unlooked-for interruption, and Garton's fond farewell. But mindful of her self-imposed task, she roused herself with a strong effort, and went out in search of Reuben.

It was already so late that she met him coming out of the Grammar School with a troop of boys at his heels, and conveyed him off to Bryn, where she kept him the whole afternoon. She had a little trouble with him at first—as Garton predicted ; Reuben burst into a flood of indignant tears when he learnt that his friend had really gone. “ He ought to have come and wished me good-bye,” sobbed the boy. “ I didn't think it of him ; he might have thrown a little gravel against my window, as he did once, and then I should have understood in an instant. It was cruel of him to forget me, when I never forgot him ; and perhaps I shall not see him again for such a long time,” finished Rube, to whom six months seemed an interminable period, and South America the very end of the world.

“ He didn't forget you, dear ; have I not given you his messages ? You must not be so hard on him, Rube.” Perhaps the task of comforting Reuben was the best thing that could have happened to Rotha. Gar's shadow was next to having Gar himself.

She kept the boy with her most of the



evening, and only sent him away because her head ached so that she could hardly bear it; it gave her an excuse for dismissing Meg too. In spite of her pain, she felt it would be a relief to be allowed to sit quietly, and speak to no one. She was glad that Mary sent round a kind little note instead of coming herself, for she began to feel so wretched that even her friend's society would have been irksome.

Rotha was almost surprised to find how she missed Garton. She had been very brave all day, and had succeeded wonderfully in comforting Reuben, and she had even astonished Meg with her cheerfulness. But towards evening the effort had been manifest; even while she sat and talked to Rube about his studies, a curious sick longing took possession of her—vague feelings of remorse for her neglect last night—a yearning to see him again and hear his voice. Not till he had really gone did Rotha discover how much she loved him, and what a blank his absence would leave in her daily life.

Six months—only six or seven months! Rotha scolded herself, and cried shame on her foolish cowardice; but the pain was none the less real while it lasted. She was spent, too, with physical exertion; and though she hardly remembered it just now, her heart was very heavy about Belle: undefinable fears haunted

her dreams ; she had cried herself to sleep like a child, but even in sleep an uneasy pain pervaded her slumbers—all sorts of misty images chased each other across her brain. Garton's sad face seemed always before her ; he seemed asking her for some help that she could not give. Once she had a terrible dream, but she could not remember it when she woke. Some haunting terror seemed upon her, and she woke with a stifled scream, to find Meg bending over her, and watching her uneasy sleep. That soothed her ; and afterwards, she fell into a dreamless slumber, and woke more refreshed this time, to find Mrs. Ord by her bedside.

Robert had returned from London late the previous night, and had begged Mary of his own accord to go round to Rotha in the morning and give her the latest news of Garton. A fresh instance of his new thoughtfulness for her, which made the colour come into Rotha's pale face.

Robert had seen Garton fairly on board, and had left him tolerably comfortable. Mr. Ramsay had accompanied them to London, and had expressed himself as much pleased with Garton's appearance and bearing. Gar seemed to have plucked up more heart about the whole affair, Robert added, and had intrusted him with loads of messages for them all ; and among them a precious little scrap for Rotha, evidently pen-



cilled on the leaf of his pocket-book, while Robert was still on deck, and thrust, half-crumbled, into his hand at the last moment.

How strange it was for Rotha to read that queer, crumpled handwriting for the first time when Mary had gone. She took it out of the folds of her dress, where it lay hidden, and read it over and over again. I wish Garton could have seen the way in which she kissed it, though she did not know then—how could she? that that crumpled paper would be one of her greatest treasures.

"My own Rotha," it began, "how many hours have we been parted! and I have been thinking of you every minute since then. I don't think you knew how full my heart was when I bade you good-bye this morning—farewell, I mean, you like that word better, you said; but perhaps I had better not speak of that now.

"I want to tell you that I have just read your parting message to me, my dear Rotha—my true-hearted Rotha! I found it on the title-page of the little Testament, underneath your mother's name. Oh, how I should have loved her, Rotha, if had she lived!

"Dear little book! all marked and underlined. I shall carry it next my heart till, God grant it so, we meet. Robert is waiting; they are going to drop anchor—the pilot has just

come on board. God bless you, my darling!—Yours, in every sense of the word, GARTON."

These few words from Garton made Rotha almost happy. She felt ashamed of the inactive misery of last night. "If Garton were here, he would tell me that I ought not to neglect my work," she said to herself, and more because she thought it would please him than even from a sense of duty, she went down to the church with Reuben to help with the decorations.

It was rather dreary work in spite of her efforts—the church always brought Garton so vividly before her; she found herself starting at every manly footstep in the momentary notion that it was his. On all sides she heard whispered lamentations and regrets among the ladies concerning the absence of the young sacristan. The Vicar was there, and did his best to help and direct the workers; but Garton's taste and ready good humour were not easily to be replaced; he had always been the universal referee on these occasions, and it gave Rotha a heavy pang to see Reuben filling the flower-vases for the altar—a work that had always been his delight. She heard Nettie and Aunt Eliza talking in sympathizing whispers about his lonely Christmas on board, and how he would miss the services; and her eyes filled with tears as she twined long trails of holly and shining evergreens over the chancel screen.

The Vicar noticed her dejected look, and wanted her to leave her work to be finished by Nettie, and come home with him; but Rotha quietly refused—it was not her way to shirk any duty, however painful, and she had Garton's work to do as well as her own. So she had a cup of tea at Nettie's, and stayed on till everything was finished, and then joined in the eve service.

She was glad afterwards that she had done so, for it soothed and refreshed her, in spite of the pain it was to her to see the boys walk up to their places in the choir-stalls without Garton at their head. How sorely she missed the dark, earnest face, and the clear deep voice that had always led the singing. The Lessons were read by a stranger; and after the service was over no tall figure went swinging to and fro across the chancel to extinguish the lights and cover up the altar. Reuben performed these offices very sadly and slowly, as though his heart for once were not in the work.

Two things had struck Rotha during the service: the Vicar was not in his place—a very unusual thing on Christmas-eve; and the prayers of the congregation were requested for one travelling by sea; and after they had risen from their knees, that beautiful hymn for those at sea had been sung. It was evident that some of the Vicarage people had intended to be there;

but when Rotha had summoned courage to look round, neither Mary nor Robert were in their usual places.

This puzzled her, and made her rather anxious, and she was not the less so when she found Rufus waiting for her outside the church, with a note from Mary.

"I have been all the way up to Bryn," exclaimed the boy, "because father understood that you were not going to remain to the service; and Mrs. Carruthers sent me down to wait for you here. I have been waiting for more than half an hour. I thought they would never have finished that last hymn."

"Why were you not in the choir, Rufus? Yes, wasn't it beautiful? so soothing, too. How pleased he would be to know we had sung it!" And without waiting for the boy's answer, she carried the note down to the lich-gate, and read it by the light of the street-lamp.

"Dear Rotha," it said, "please come to us. Mr. Greenock has been here, and we have had a terrible scene with Belle. She knows now what is the matter with her; but it has broken her down utterly to have her fears verified, and I dare not leave her. Austin has been obliged to stay at home to tell Robert. He is in a dreadful state—and no wonder. Do come to me at once, Dear."

"I ought to have had this note an hour ago,"



exclaimed Rotha ; and without waiting for Rufus to follow her, she set off for the Vicarage at a run that brought the boy panting after her. "Don't knock," he cried, "I have the key ; and it would disturb Aunt Belle. I will go and fetch mother." And almost before Rotha could grope her way through the dark hall, Mary had come to her side silently, and taking her hand brought her into her own room, and closed the door softly.

"Oh, Mrs. Ord, I am so sorry!" began Rotha; "did Rufus tell you I was at church?"

"Hush ! yes, I know. I have been wanting you ; but it could not be helped, and she is quiet now. Oh, Rotha, what a day this has been!" And Mary began to cry, but in a subdued, patient sort of way that went to Rotha's heart.

"Dear Mrs. Ord, and you are so tired !" said the girl, in a sympathizing voice, at which Mary leant her head against her shoulder and cried more than ever. It was some time before she could recover herself to speak plainly.

"I didn't mean to do this," she said, at last, in answer to Rotha's silent kisses ; "but I think it has done me good. Oh, Rotha, I hope I am not rebellious, and I have Austin and the boys. But still she is my only sister." And the tears coursed more swiftly down Mrs. Ord's face, as her grief resolved itself into words.

"Dear Mrs. Ord, Mother Mary, don't!" And

Rotha laid her cheek against hers, and for a few moments the two women wept together.

"Perhaps it is better so—oh, my dear! To think of her going, day after day, to that Infirmary, without letting us know how ill she was—and all to spare Austin! I can't bear to think of it. And then for them to say that all this strain and anxiety have been killing her."

"Who are they? Dear Mrs. Ord, wouldn't it ease you to tell me everything plainly out? Is it Mr. Greenock who has been telling you all this?"

"Yes, Mr. Greenock, and Dr. Chapman. Mr. Greenock wished a consultation when he found how things were, and then they told Austin, and he fetched me. They say one of her lungs is quite gone, and that she is in a very precarious state. Mr. Greenock said he could not understand how any one could have suffered so much, and have done what she has done; and he declared if it had gone on—this concealment and strain, I suppose he meant—that she could not have lasted three months."

"But I don't understand. Is it, as you fear—is it"—decline? Rotha was going to add, but she hesitated. Mary shook her head mournfully.

"That is what I cannot find out, neither of them would speak plainly. Mr. Greenock did not say much, but I could see he dreaded the worst. He would not exactly say that she was in

a decline, but he owned that he feared it. Dr. Chapman took a milder view of the case. Both of them agreed that a warm climate should be tried without delay. But I noticed that though Dr. Chapman spoke hopefully of Torquay now, and of Mentone next winter, and added his conviction that by these means a partial, if not a complete cure might be effected ; Mr. Greenock only looked grave, and it struck me afterwards that he had recommended it as a last chance, and that he knew it could only prolong her life for a few months ; and I can see that Austin fears it too."

"But, Mrs. Ord, wouldn't it be cruel to remove her if they know it is of no use?"

"That is what Austin said ; he wanted Mr. Greenock to give us leave to keep her with us : but both he and Dr. Chapman agreed that the March winds would kill her. They want her to go to Torquay in about two or three weeks' time, but she must not undertake the journey this weather, in the state she is in. One thing, we are not to allow her to break off her engagement—at least not yet, or we shall take away her last chance. But, oh, Rotha, I know they think that she will never be well enough to marry him."

Rotha sighed heavily. "I am afraid not ; but I think they are right, and it would kill her at once. Oh, Mrs. Ord, how dreadful it will be for him when he knows it!"

"Hush! don't speak so loud—he knows it now. Austin has been with him all the evening, we have had hard work with him to get him to believe it. He fights against it so: I don't think he gives up all hope yet, though he knows he must go without her. He turned round quite fiercely on Austin when he said something about the engagement having to be given up. He declares he will come over in six months' time and marry her. Oh, Rotha, it is plain to see that he is half beside himself with remorse; it is more than grief that is maddening him."

Rotha leaned her head on her hand; she hardly knew what to say. "He ought to have let her go with me," she returned slowly, at length; "he knows that himself now. Mrs. Ord, I don't quite know what to do, but I think I should like to go to him. He might listen to me now. Hark! what is that?" she continued, turning very pale. Everything startled her just now, but it was only the dining-room door opening, and the Vicar calling softly across the hall for Mary.

Mrs. Ord went at once, and Rotha followed her; the Vicar held out his hand to her with a little surprise when he saw her. "Robert has been asking for you," he said. "I did not know you were here; I thought Rufus came in alone."

"I was at church, but I came directly afterwards. Did you say"—turning paler than ever, "that he was asking for me?"



The Vicar nodded. "He is in there—he has been asking for you two or three times this evening; he wished me to tell you when you came in, that he wanted to speak to you alone."

Rotha looked bewildered, as well she might—wanting to see her, and alone.

Robert was leaning against the mantelpiece, with his back towards her; but he started at her entrance, and raised his head, and then, after a moment's hesitation, held out his hand. It was not taken for an instant—perhaps Rotha hardly perceived it, but a bitter smile wreathed his thin lips at what he imagined was her pride.

"You need not to have hesitated," he said, sharply—the sharpness of pain, not anger. "I meant to have told you—but never mind, it will keep; the thing is, that I have sent for you. I suppose I ought to thank you first for your kindness in coming to me. Some women would not have acted as you have, but I confess I am in no mood for mere courtesy to-night."

"Neither am I," returned Rotha, quietly; his harsh words, his pale face only inspired her with pity. With an involuntary movement she went up a little closer, and looked at him with straightforward, honest eyes. "You are in trouble, and you have sent for me," she said, softly; "and now, what can Rotha Maturin do for Robert Ord?"

"Stop," he said, hoarsely. "I don't want pity—least of all from you! Pity her if you will. Good heavens! to think how she loves me, and that I, blind fool that I am, have as good as murdered her."

"Robert! Robert Ord!" She is constrained to cry out his name, his violence is so terrible to her; and then, with a sudden pitiful impulse, she goes nearer, and lays her hand on his arm.

"Mr. Ord, have you sent for me to tell me this?"

"Yes, to tell you this—this, and anything else you like. Oh, you may humble me at your pleasure. I am a proud man if you will, but this is your hour of triumph. I would rather have you triumph over me than pity me. Why do you look at me like this, Miss Maturin? Do you think I am mad, to-night?"

"I think you are," she returned, softly. "God help you! mad with pain and disappointment and remorse; you are cruel to yourself, cruel to me, to Belle, to everybody. Was it your fault that you were so blindfolded that you could not see the truth?"

"Yes," he returned, with a dogged sort of honesty; "it was my fault, I would not allow myself to be convinced. Is your memory so bad that you have forgotten our conversation down on the sands?"



She drooped her head sadly—she could not help it. Why should he recall those bitter moments? Humiliated—ah! and had she not been humiliated then?

"Well, I see you remember," he continued, watching her; "you tried to convince me then. You would have saved her for me if I had only permitted it; and I let her fade before my eyes, brute that I was, rather than owe her preservation to you. No, don't interrupt me; if I did not know my motives then, I do now."

"No, no," she cried, putting out her hand to stop him. "Don't talk so—you must not talk so; it was this terrible prejudice against me that hardened you. I came between you and your life, and made you mad."

"More shame to me!" he retorted. But she put out her hand again to stop him.

"Ah, you are more cruel to yourself than you have been to me," she exclaimed. "If you mean that you have sinned against me, have I not forgiven it long ago? Mr. Ord, you have sent for me, but it is not Rotta Maturin who has come to you now—it is the little Sister, Gar's future wife, who prays you to be reconciled to her."

Her hands went out to him tremblingly as she uttered his name; she had forgotten everything at the sight of his terrible grief. If he had wronged her she did not remember it now.

"Gar's brother! Poor Robert," he thinks he hears her say so softly. As he turns away and folds his arms over his breast, something that would have been tears in other men glistened now in Robert Ord's eyes. Another moment, and her hand rests on his outstretched palm.

"Rotha—Rotha Maturin," he says, in a broken voice.

"I hear you, Mr. Ord, I understand you. There is no need to say anything more."

"There is every need, you mean. Do you think I shall spare myself? You told me that I must never come and offer you my hand till I would own that I had wronged you. I own it now."

"I know it—I can see it. I pray you to spare yourself."

"Spare myself!" he repeated, scornfully. "Oh, I have been so good to you—you may well ask me to do this. Because I envied you your possessions, I must look upon your every act and word with a jaundiced eye. I must even sacrifice my poor Belle to my unnatural rancour. Oh, you were right, when you said you would rather die than touch my hand."

"I am touching it now; it feels like the hand of a friend. Mr. Ord, these things are all passed and over. I have forgiven them long ago. Why will you recall them?"

"To do you a tardy justice," he replied, vehe-

mently. "Because, God knows, I have done you a bitter wrong—because you were as innocent as a little child—and I was cruel to you."

"Not cruel—only hard, and hardest of all to yourself. You were wrong to your better judgment, and now the scales have fallen from your eyes. Indeed it is all forgiven. You know Rotha Maturin now, and you know she is your friend."

"My friend?" he muttered, "Rotha Maturin my friend!" A strange softness crept over his face, and then he turned it away, and leant heavily against the mantelpiece; but at that moment something hard and bitter passed out of Robert Ord's heart for ever.

By-and-by she knew why he had sent for her—not to tell her this, as he reiterates again and again, but to beg her on his knees—if needs be, to take Belle away. It is her last chance—her only chance—he affirms, sadly. And Rotha slowly and seriously grants the request. She cannot tell him what she has told Mary, that she believes it has come too late.

Mary came down presently to tell Robert that Belle was asking for him. "She is growing restless again, and wonders what has become of you, Dear. She knows now that Austin has told you everything."

Robert turned very pale.

"I did not mean to have seen her to-night," he said. "I am half afraid of what I may say.

I think you had better come up with me, Mary." And Rotha was left alone.

She might have been alone about twenty minutes, when she heard Mary calling her, and went up at once.

"Belle wants to bid you good-night," began Mary, cheerfully, as Rotha entered; but Belle's feeble voice interrupted her.

"No, not good-night. I want to speak to you, Rotha. Please come here." And Belle raised herself from Robert's arm, and held out her hot hands to Rotha. How beautiful she looked with that hectic flush on her wasted cheek, and her eyes burning with fever.

"Dear Rotha, come here. Tell him—Mary will not—that it is all no use, and that he must not send me away. Tell him it will kill me."

"It will kill you to remain here, Belle. Mr. Greenock and Dr. Chapman both said so."

"That is what he keeps saying. Oh, Rotha, ask him not. He knows that he is going in less than three months, and yet he wants us to be parted. It is not enough that I am never to be his wife, but he will not even let me see the last of him." And Belle flung herself down on the couch again, as though her last hope were taken from her.

"For your own good—only for your good, Belle; it is your last chance. You know they said so."



"But they did not think so," she returned, in a voice of despair. "Rotha, does he think that I shall care to live, when I am never to be his wife? Tell him to ask me anything but this."

"I cannot," he returned, in a low voice. "Dear Belle, why will you persist in speaking as though there were no hope? Did not Dr. Chapman say that a winter or two at Mentone would set you up? Go with Miss Maturin in a fortnight's time, and I will come down to Devonshire to wish you good-bye."

"Good-bye!" she returned, in a bewildered voice; "it is not you who have to say good-bye, surely?"

"Yes, for a little while, but it will not be long, I will promise you. Only do as the doctors tell you, and in six months or a year's time I will come over myself and take you home with me."

"Take me home! Only hear him," she returned, in a faint voice. "He is deceiving himself still. Dear Robert, why will you not understand that we must give it all up? I am your poor friend, dear, but I shall never be anything more to you."

"Dear Belle do not refuse him; he means it for your good," exclaimed Rotha. "Look at him; you are breaking his heart." For, overcome by her words, Robert had covered his face with his

hands. In another moment Belle had flung her thin arms round his neck. Never to her dying day did Rotha forget the look of despairing love on her face.

"Oh, Robert, don't; anything but that. Dear Bertie, put down your hands, and let me see your face. Do you really mean that you wish me to go?"

"Yes, really and truly; for my sake—for the sake of your own love." He looked at her eagerly, almost hopefully; but there was no answering gleam in Belle's eyes.

"For your sake? yes, I understand. Kiss me, Bertie. I will go. No, not that name—that is what I used to call you; it must be Robert now."

"I like the old name and the old ways best, Bella."

"Do you, Bertie? Ah, there it is again. Are we alone, or is Rotha there?"

"I am here," said Rotha, coming gently to her side. "I am waiting to say good-night, Belle."

"Good-night," returned Belle, dreamily. "I thought I was alone with Robert, and that I was oh! so tired. You will have to carry me upstairs to-night, Bertie. Where is Mary?" But before her sister could be summoned to the room, Belle, exhausted by her emotions, had fainted away.



C H A P T E R VIII.

UNDER THE ROD.

"To us,
The fools of *habit*, sweeter seems.

To rest beneath the clover sod,
That takes the sunshine and the rain
Or where the kneeling hamlet drain
The chalice of the grapes of God.

Than if with thee the roaring wells
Should gulf him fathom-deep in brine,
And hands so often clasp'd in mine
Should toss with tangle and with shells."

IN MEMORIAM.

It was the saddest Christmas-day that the inhabitants of the Vicarage had ever known. Uncle Gar's absence was loudly lamented by the boys, who could imagine no holiday without their favourite playfellow and adviser, while it was felt as a very real loss by the other members of the family. Mary especially missed the bright, unflagging spirits and helpful good-nature which had gone so far to make Gar's influence with the lads; she had always called him her eldest boy, and had been very motherly and watchful over him, claiming a right to lecture him on all his shortcomings, to which Gar had submitted with a tolerable amount of patience. But even Garton's absence sunk into comparative

insignificance beside the fact of Belle's failing health, and it was quite sufficient to note the Vicar's grave looks and Mary's troubled face to see how heavily this new blow had fallen on them.

If Belle had lacked somewhat in gentleness and warmth to those with whom she lived ; if she had been self-absorbed, reticent, and failing in that large influence that might have been hers, it was all forgotten now ; and nothing was remembered of her but her sorrow, her passionate devotion to Robert, and the fortitude with which she had borne her increasing pains ; or if this were not sufficient to win their forbearance, was she not the mother's only sister—the sister whom she had loved and with whom she had borne through her own happy married life, and whom Austin had cherished for her sake with more than a brother's patience ?

And as it was with them, so it was with the boys : no need to hush their noisy footsteps and merry voices now, as the lads crept about the house bating their very breath for fear Aunt Belle should be disturbed. Aunt Belle, who had never won their boyish confidence, who had never tried to win it, on whose knee they had rarely clambered since their babyhood, and whom they had always held in an awe and reverence which their mother with her open arms and ready kisses had never inspired.



It was strange to see the lads waiting upon her ; Guy especially, who was in reality her favourite, was very helpful and zealous in her service. It must have given Belle many a pang to remember how little she had interested herself in Mary's boys—their very affection was a reproach to her. Arty one day got into her lap and put his arms round her neck. "Dear Aunt Belle," said the affectionate little fellow, "why don't you get well when we all love you so ? It makes mammy so unhappy."

"I don't think you can love me much, Arty," replied Belle, fixing her hollow eyes mournfully on the child. "I have not done much for you—I have been very selfish and wicked, Arty." And then before the boy could answer, she pressed him to her closer than she had ever done before, and burst into tears.

Mary, who was working at the other end of the room, hurried across and lifted her boy off his aunt's lap.

"Oh, Arty!" she exclaimed, reproachfully, "you must not tire poor Aunt Belle so." But Belle, struggling vainly with her emotion, said, "No, it is not that, dear Mary ; let him stay—it is not Arty that tires me, it is only"—drawing her sister's face down to hers and kissing it remorsefully—"it is only because it makes me so unhappy, Mary, to think how little I have done for you and your boys."

Poor Belle! Always so, always self-tormented and self-absorbed, worn to a shadow by consuming sadness, shedding bitter tears over a useless past, and fighting against the doom she feels is irrevocable—baffled, weary, and unconvinced—so did the unhappy girl drag on her heavy days. Willingly, right willingly, would Austin have ministered to her sick heart and soul, but Belle shrank from his loving counsel. “Ask Austin not to come and read to me,” she said more than once to her sister; “it looks so as though I were dying. If I am worse I will send for him.” And the Vicar, albeit with a heavy heart, forbore out of consideration for her morbid fancies. “It seems wrong, but what can I do?” he said once to Rotha; “her mind is harassing her body, and both are alike sick, poor soul! but she will have none of my healing.” But Rotha only murmured quietly, “Let her alone, Mr. Ord. Belle is like no one else: she is fighting it out with herself. By-and-by her weakness will overcome her, and she will cling to your every word as eagerly as she now repels them; but just now she only remembers that her heart is broken.”

Rotha’s unspoken sympathy, so intense and so delicately manifested, did much to win Belle’s wayward confidence. Her soft voice and quiet ways were very pleasant to the sick girl, whose shattered nerves could bear so little; she felt

Rotha's presence a rest, and grew more than reconciled to her sister's brief absences from her room, if Rotha could take her place. In many ways she suited her better than Mary. Mary, oppressed with many cares, had lost much of her wonted cheerfulness; faint streaks of grey were plainly discernible in the mother's pretty hair, her smiling face had grown worn and anxious-looking; it was not always easy for her to conceal her uneasiness when Belle coughed or looked more than usually ill; and Belle, who hated to be pitied, would turn impatiently from her questions and caresses. She would have deceived them all still, and cheated herself too, if it had been possible.

But Rotha's face, grave only with reflected sadness, grew daily more necessary to her; she would watch for her coming every morning, and brighten perceptibly at the sound of her footsteps. She could always bear her to talk to her, when Mary's voice fretted her into a fever; and her reading was a real refreshment during the long twilight, when she lay and waited for Robert.

Rotha did not always go home at these times. Robert always looked for her, and expected her to be there. Since the day of their reconciliation, when he had owned and acknowledged her as a friend, Rotha had no reason to complain of his manner to her. As far as she was concerned he was an altered man.

He never met her now without a kind smile and a hearty grasp of the hand; if she stayed late at the Vicarage, however tired and jaded he was, he would always walk up with her to her own door.

Others besides Rotha noticed the almost deferential reverence with which he addressed her; it seemed as though he were always trying to make amends for his past injustice to her. The Vicar openly congratulated her on this happy condition of things, but Rotha just now was a little silent over the whole matter. If the truth must be told, she felt somewhat oppressed by it all; in her humility it was almost painful to feel herself so watched and considered.

She was somewhat perplexed too at his sudden change of opinion, but at her first timid questioning on the subject, Robert had stoutly denied that it was sudden.

"I had my doubts a long time before I would own to them," he said to her, with the rare honesty which had first won her esteem for Robert Ord; "but I think it was that talk down on the sands that first shook my faith in my own judgment. I would not give in at the time—but it somehow did for me; and then your giving everything to Gar: that did not look like covetousness—did it?"

"I wish he would come back!" sighed Rotha, touched by this reference to her lover; "how

many days is it since he went away—hardly a week yet? Mr. Robert”—turning to him half seriously, half playfully—“you had as much right to come up to Bryn and steal some of my property as to send away Gar.”

She was afraid she had hurt him, for he did not answer. But a moment afterwards she saw his eyes fixed on her with a strange, indefinable expression.

“Sent him away? Yes, you are right. I am afraid it was my doing. Evil for good—not good for evil. Miss Maturin, I wish I could have gone in his stead! Yes, I wish to Heaven I could have gone in his stead!”

“And left Belle? Oh! for shame, Mr. Robert!”

“Yes, and left Belle. What is Belle to me, or I to her now? Shall we ever be man and wife? Oh, my poor girl! how little I knew when I gave up everything for her sake that we should ever come to this! Miss Maturin,” turning on her abruptly, “do you believe in long engagements?—I don’t.”

“I don’t know,” faltered Rotha. “I think it is a great test; it was so in Jacob’s case. Seven years is a long time, Mr. Ord.”

“Why will people always quote Jacob as an example?” returned Robert, impatiently. “An exception is nothing to the rule. Did Rachel’s beauty fade, I wonder? Did Jacob eat out his

heart with that long waiting? Do you think it well that all freshness should wear off? Do Belle and I love each other the better for knowing each other's faults, and learning painful lessons of forbearance for half a dozen years? Does not the heart grow old too sometimes?"

"No," replied Rotha, indignantly. "If that be your man's sophistry I repel it entirely. 'Many waters cannot quench love,' we read, and many years ought not to outlive it. Belle may try you, Mr. Ord—you see I am speaking plainly—but she never loved you better than she loves you now, though she knows she will never be your wife."

"I don't deserve it," he returned, in an agitated voice, "Heaven knows! I feel you are right—women always are. Never mind if I meant what I said just now. God knows I would cut off my right hand if I could make amends to her for what she has gone through for my sake; and if she may only be spared to me for a few years, I will guarantee that I will make her happier, poor child, than she has ever been before."

"I am sure of it," replied Rotha, and then the subject dropped. But she never forgot his words: they convinced her that her suspicions were true, that Robert Ord's remorse was greater than his love; and that, however noble and faithful he had been in his allegiance to his be-

trothed, that the engagement had been a hasty one ; and that in spite of his warm affection Belle was not loved, never had been loved with the whole strength and passion of his nature.

Rotha hardly knew whether she resented this for Belle's sake ; but it was certain that this instinctive perception of his lukewarmness kept her a little aloof from Robert, and caused her to redouble her tenderness and pity to Belle ; for she now watched jealously for every symptom of coldness on his part, but could not find the slightest fault with his manner. Never since the days of his early love, when her beauty and her too evident affection for himself had tempted him from his prudence, had he been so gentle, so devoted ; and less keen eyes than Rotha's would have judged that his was the deeper affection of the two.

But alas ! alas ! though in his remorse and pity he would have cut off his right hand to have been allowed to call her his wife, her face was not the dearest to him, neither was her name the oftenest on his lips. But those who saw his altered looks, and marvelled at his sorrow, never guessed Robert Ord's secret, and least of all, she who had exercised so baneful an influence over his life.

Did he know it ?

Ay, and battled with the sore temptation, as only a good man can battle, crushing and

stamping out the unholy thing with his strong, proud will till he believed he had trodden it under foot.

Was it his fault that his oppression had begotten this ; that out of his hatred and her exceeding patience had sprung the mad infatuation which was to make him grey before his time, and embitter so many of his future years ; when his memory could recall to him nothing but the tears he had caused her to shed, and the hopes that through his means had been broken ; when the knowledge of her forgiveness and her sisterly affection were no consolation to him, and he fed on the ashes of his unhappy passion ?

Did he love, or did he hate her ? It was long since Robert Ord had asked himself that question. The little stab that her reproachful words had given him that day, when they had walked side by side on the sands, had first awakened him to the sense of his danger. How her face had haunted him !—it haunted him still ; but not till the hour when he heard that she was to be his brother's wife—when he saw her clinging to Gar's arm—thinking of Gar, sorrowing for Gar—not till then —did he know that Belle's dying beauty was nothing to him, compared to Rotha's wistful eyes and the sweet pale face which was henceforth to be his torment and his delight.

Oh, inexplicable workings of human nature, entangled and involved and interwoven with all

manner of devious threads. Was it Rotha's womanly instincts or the mere prompting of her generous love for Gar which made her shrink more from Robert in his strange new amity than ever she had done in the days of his bitter warfare?

It was almost a week since Garton had left—a long week, as it seemed to Rotha, sitting so patiently in Belle's sick room day after day.

Rotha flagged a little in the heavy atmosphere, as was natural, but she never complained of its dulness. It seemed a dreary exchange for the free, happy life of the last few months, when Mary and she sang and laughed over their work, and Garton and the boys came and teased them out of all propriety; how she missed their boating excursions and their happy rambles, and the glorious teas which Meg prepared to surprise them on their return. Now hour after hour she sat listening to the faint click of her own and Mary's needles, broken now and then by low-voiced conversation while Belle dozed. Here was daily suffering to be witnessed—suffering borne patiently indeed, but without the cheerfulness of real submission. Here was the languid body and unquiet mind, acting and reacting lamentably on each other—suffering which Rotha strove to lighten, but without success. Still it was something that Belle liked to have her, though it did seem a little hard for Mary that Rotha's were the only absences ever noticed—not

that Mary's unselfishness ever wasted a sigh on this. She would sigh a little sadly over this new infatuation of Belle's, but only remonstrated when her exactions were likely to be injurious to Rotha.

"Has not Rotha come yet? How long she is!" was often the querulous complaint of a morning. Rotha would come up presently with all sorts of pretty excuses for her delay, in the shape of tiny baskets imbedded in moss, with rare hothouse flowers or choice fruit daintily nestled in the greenery. Sometimes it would be a picture, or a new book, or a portfolio of engravings from Bryn—all sorts of little surprises to cheat the invalid's new day into brightness. It was a sign of changed feelings on Belle's part that the Cashmere shawls were in their place. Again, one day she made some sort of mention of them in a shamefaced way, and the next afternoon she woke up to find them covering her. Belle drew them over her face, and shed a few silent tears underneath their soft folds. It was so like Rotha's magnanimity!

One afternoon Rotha had left her somewhat unexpectedly, in obedience to a summons from Meg. Mrs. Carruthers wanted her up at Bryn on some domestic business. Belle was a great deal better, and she could leave her comfortably, especially as Guy promised to be on guard when his mother was not there. It was a lovely afternoon, and even these few steps were a refresh-



ment to Rotha, and so was her quiet talk with Meg.

She had promised to be back again as soon as possible, but by the time her letters were written and tea was over, it was getting late—almost time for Robert to be back from Thornborough, and then she would no longer be wanted. She said something of this to Meg as she put on her hat.

“ I shall just say ‘ good-night’ to Belle and see she is comfortable, and then I shall come away. You shall not have another lonely evening, Meg, if I can help it. We will have one of our regular home-evenings—music and a little reading. How delicious it will be ! ” And Rotha ran off with one of her sunny smiles.

Poor Rotha ! How little she thought—— But we must not anticipate. It was moonlight, and the sea looked just as she loved to see it—all black shadow, save for one broad pathway of silver ripples. Down by the bridge lay a stretch of shining sands. The whole scene, so full of fixed shadow and gleaming light, the white road, the dark wintry sky, sown here and there with stars, seemed full of a new beauty to her ; and a sense of her unworthiness and littleness suddenly smote upon her as she remembered the pleasant lines that had been appointed to her, and how from “ If needs be ” she had learnt to say, “ It is well.”

“ God is very good,” said the girl softly to her-

self, "and I am, oh, so happy!" And as she looked over the moon-lighted haze, she thought of Garton, sailing further and further from her, but without any mournfulness. "What is, is right," said Rotha.

It was about the time when the family were generally gathered round the tea-table, the most sociable hour of the day, as the mother called it; but to Rotha's surprise the meal remained untasted on the table, and only Laurie and Arty were in the room—Arty sitting disconsolately on Laurie's knee with his finger in his mouth, and his small round eyes fixed on the cake; both were rather incoherent in their answers to Rotha's questions. Arty opined that somebody was cross, Deb was for one, and they wern't going to have any tea at all, at all.

"Do be quiet," Arty, interrupted Laurie, giving him a shake; "here I have been telling you Jack the Giant-Killer for the last half hour, and it is all no use."

"I don't want Jack Anybody. I want my tea," returned Arty, beginning to whimper. "If nobody's cross, why can't we have some, Laurie?"

"Where is every one?" asked Rotha, bewildered by the children's disconsolate condition, so unlike the mother's ordinary care. Arty's hair was rough and his collar tumbled, and Laurie's hands were covered with ink.

"Where's everybody?" repeated Laurie,

slowly. He always meditated over his words. "Oh, I don't know. Guy's up with Aunt Belle, and Rufus has gone to the telegraph-office, and mother is shut up with father in the study, and Uncle Robert is there too, and—do be quiet, Arty! Deb has just been in, and is going to bring us our tea; and it is so dull all alone," finished Laurie, running his blackened fingers through Arty's hair, at which Arty, being cross enough already, fairly roared.

Rotha could learn nothing from Laurie's drawled-out sentences, so she betook herself to Belle's room, but Belle had fallen asleep, and at first sight she thought Guy was asleep too, for he was curled up on the easychair with his head on his arms, but he started at her light footstep, and held up his hand.

"Hush! Aunt Belle is asleep, and mother says we must be very careful not to wake her; she had such a bad night." And Guy, having delivered his message, seemed inclined to put down his head again, but Rotha knelt down and put her lips close to his ear.

"What's become of the mother, Guy? is she busy? Why, Guy, you have never been crying?"

"Oh, hush!" implored the boy. He sat up quite straight now, and looked very frightened. "If you wake her what am I to do, and mother not here? Don't ask me any questions," he

continued, with quivering lips, and trying hard not to burst out crying. "I must not tell you anything ; they told me I must not."

"Not tell me ? Is anything the matter ? Oh, Guy, if you love me don't keep me in suspense. There is not anything the matter, is there, dear ? You have only tried to frighten me."

"I haven't," returned Guy, indignantly. "I wouldn't be so wicked. "Oh, dear Rotha, do go downstairs. I can't bear it," cried the boy, trying to swallow his sobs. "I can't bear it, when we all love you so, to see you looking at me like this."

"Oh, Guy, don't." The lad's rosy face was quite pale now, but it was not so white as Rotha's, as she rose stiffly from her knees ; why does she put her hand to her side as though she had been struck there ? why do her thoughts fly to Garton instantly ? "That it may please Thee to preserve all that travel by land or by water." "We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord." Why do these clauses rise unbidden to her mind, as she leans for a moment over the sobbing child ? Guy, who never cried—who, his mother said, had never cried since his babyhood—and Guy loved Garton ; she remembers that.

"Do go down, Rotha ; they are all in the study," groans out poor Guy. Rotha makes a gesture of assent, and goes slowly down,

not hurriedly, but dragging one foot heavily after another, as though they were suddenly weighted with lead. When she had got there, she paused in the dark hall, and said two things to herself—or rather the two things got themselves spoken unconsciously in her mind. “Whatever happens God is good, and I must remember that. And if anything be wrong with Gar—my Gar—I would like to lie down and die before life is a long misery to me.” But she never knew she spoke thus within herself; she had a notion instead that she was standing for nearly half-an-hour trying to turn the handle of the study door with her nerveless hand, and listening to Mary’s low sobbing inside, and yet five minutes had hardly elapsed since she had left Guy.

If she had gone in quite unprepared, she would have known at once that something had happened. The Vicar was sitting in his usual place at his writing table, just opposite the picture of the Good Shepherd, with his head bowed down on his hands, and Mary was kneeling beside him, with her arms round his neck and Robert—but Rotha saw nothing beyond the Vicar’s motionless figure, and Mary’s tear-stained face.

“Oh, Austin, here is Rotha! Why, my dear, my dear, who has sent you in here, just now?”

“Nobody sent me! I came of my own accord.” How strangely her voice sounds; her lips have

become suddenly dry. Her strength fails and she leans heavily on the Vicar's shoulder to support herself; there is a deep-drawn sigh behind her, and then some one, she fancies it is Robert, places her silently in a chair.

"Mary, I was not prepared for this. Robert—Mary, what shall we do? I am becoming weak with all this suddenness. I must have time." Was that the Vicar's tone, so broken, so irritable, so worn with misery? Who was it that said Garton was his favourite brother, his pupil, his — No matter, the strongest man will give way under a sudden shock.

"Some one must tell her, Mary; this is a woman's work," says Robert, still from the background. Through it all Rotha fancies his voice comes from a distance—miles away—muffled—sepulchral. She shudders away from it.

"Yes, Austin, I will tell her; dear husband, dear husband, as though I would not spare you this ten times over." When did Mary Ord consider herself, when Austin was in trouble? But with a sudden terror, Rotha puts out her hands as though to ward off her approach; she would stop up her ears if she could, she knows it all; why need they trouble her with words? But Mary, pressing the cold hands to her bosom, falters out "That she loves her, she loves her, but that she must be very patient, for that God our Father which is in heaven had afflicted



them all." "Don't look at Austin, my precious, don't look at my husband, he is not himself just now, he cannot help us. Look at Robert, Rotha, darling ; he is so brave and thoughtful for us all." But Rotha, moving her dry lips, shakes her head, and fixes her eyes still on Mary.

"When our dear boy left us only a week ago—,"

"Only a week ago," repeated Rotha; then suddenly, "Oh, Gar, Gar."

"When our poor boy, our dear Gar, sailed last Tuesday night, Heaven knows how little we expected such bitter tidings, how much need there would be for our prayers—' That it may please Thee to preserve all that travel by land or by water.' ' We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord.'"—The two little hands locked together on Mary's bosom struggle hard to be free.—" ' We beseech Thee, we beseech Thee, good Lord.' "

"Oh, Mary, the cruel sea, the cruel, hungry sea! Oh, Gar, Gar!"

"Robert, what shall we do? She guesses, but she does not hear me. She looks blind and deaf—stupefied almost, poor darling!" But Rotha only repeats again and again, slowly, "Oh, Gar, Gar!"

"When our poor Gar," began Mary again, this time very slowly ; "when our poor Gar left us never to return again—"

"Never to return again!" repeated Rotha, and then stopped suddenly with a low moan.

"He little thought what would happen so near home. They were fog-bound, Rotha; and on Sunday night," said Mary, speaking as though to a little child, "when they were quite near home, and all but the helmsman were asleep, a great vessel ran on to them, and sank the ship, and they were all—Oh pitiful God!—all lost but a few men and two or three women."

"And Gar was not among them—speak louder, Mary, louder! the waves seem to drown your voice! The waves! God bless you dear! Oh, my poor boy, my poor boy!"

In the many mansions she knows it now—no need to tell her more. Somebody behind her says, "That will do. Open the door, Austin, and give her air." Cold fragrant waters splash on her forehead. She has a notion that Mary has taken her in her arms, and is crying softly over her. The Vicar's massive figure seems to block up her vision, but he does not say much. She tries to tell him that she is not faint; that he must not be so sorry for her, because it is his loss too, but breaks down at her first word, and hides her head in Mary's bosom.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away," said the Vicar, solemnly. His voice reaches Rotha. She can hear him, oh! so clearly. "Dear wife, I have been very weak. I ought

never to have left this to you. It is not poor Gar, it is happy Gar now, and she will think so by-and-by." And as he lays his hands on her head pitifully, yet in silent blessing, Rotha suddenly looks up at him with wild eyes, and prays him to take her home.

But it is not the Vicar—it is Robert who takes her; but she hardly knows it, for she is looking up at the starlit sky, where her saint is—her lover, her Garton. She has no idea of the strong arm that is supporting her all the way, or of the looks of anguish that he casts on her pale uplifted face. She scarcely knows what he says as she totters into Meg's arms, but she wonders with a dreary wonder why Meg cries so. Mary cried too, and Guy; but she has no tears, only a hot, choking pain. By-and-by, when she lies down on her little white bed, and Meg extinguishes the light, and leaves her, by her own desire, to the friendly darkness, Rotha turns her face to the wall with an exceeding bitter cry, "Oh, Gar! Gar! I always loved you so, Dear! Come back to me, Gar."

CHAPTER IX.

AN ERRAND OF MERCY.

“ I hold it true, whate’er befall;
 I feel it, when I sorrow most
 ‘Tis better to have loved and lost
 Than never to have loved at all.”

IN MEMORIAM.

“ Oh ! blest be thine unbroken light !
 That watch’d me as a seraph’s eye,
 And stood between me and the night
 For ever shining sweetly nigh.

“ And when the cloud upon us came,
 Which strove to blacken o’er thy ray,
 Then purer spread thy gentle flame,
 And dash’d the blackness all away.”

BYRON.

NEVER till she had lost him did Rotha know what Garton had been to her, and how their brief engagement and the loss of his great love mould influence and sadden her life. For a little while she seemed utterly broken.

It was not that she rebelled against his cruel fate—cut off in such an awful way in the midst of his youth ; it was not that she failed in meekness and submission, or complained that her lot was unduly hard. She was far too humbly and sincerely a Christian for that. It was only that the spring of her energy and life seemed broken



by the suddenness of the shock, and that for a little time she seemed so crushed that it was difficult to rouse her.

All the next day she lay on the couch in her own room, with her face hidden from the light, as she had hidden it on the previous night ; just ill enough to be soothed by Meg's attentions, but neither asking for nor needing sympathy, and keeping perfect silence in the midst of her grief.

But as hour after hour passed on, Heaven only knew the bitterness of that girlish heart, as the tide of recollection swept over it, recalling Gar's tenderness and sad farewell. Once, towards evening, when the tide was rising, the low surging of the waves seemed to break the stillness of the room. Meg never knew why she suddenly buried her face in the cushions, and tried to stifle her sobs. Many and many a night for long afterwards she dreaded to go to sleep, for fear that sound should mingle with her thoughts, and so the awful scene be reproduced in her dreams. Often she started in affright, thinking she heard the crash of the broken timbers, the angry rush of the water, the despairing cries of drowning men, and amongst them one dark figure, steadfast, with the look of mortal agony on his young face, calling on his God as he went down into his yawning grave.

Oh, no marvel if she brooded silently over her

trouble, and shrank from the least mention of any of the facts ; not for many a long week did she learn any of the distressing details, though she must have known that the papers were full of them, and that the country was ringing from end to end with news of the sad disaster. Meg put them all carefully aside, in case she should ask for them, but she never did ; by-and-by she heard all the particulars from another quarter, when she was better fitted to bear it.

From the moment they brought Rube to her they ceased to be seriously uneasy, for at the sight of her favourite the white strain on Rotha's face relaxed ; and though she wept bitterly, anything was better than the numbness and apathy of the last few hours ; and tears, as they knew, would ease the overburdened heart.

Rotha was more herself when she had seen Rube : the boy's sorrow seemed to arouse her to the conviction that others were suffering as well as herself. She did not try to comfort the poor child—that would have been impossible ; but she stroked his curly head as he knelt beside her, and whispered to him that he was her boy now, and she would love him—oh ! so dearly—for Gar's sake. And then she called to Meg faintly to take him away, for he would make himself sick with crying, and she could do nothing to help him.

- But the next day she had him again, and the

next day after that ; and Meg found that she would do anything that Rube asked her, and that she seemed always more restless and unhappy when the boy was away. After his second visit she roused herself to inquire after her friends at the Vicarage, and found that, to her surprise, Robert had been every morning and evening to inquire after her.

He looked very ill, Meg added, and he had told her that the Vicar had been far from well too. Mrs. Ord had sent all sorts of affectionate messages to Rotha ; but she had not come round herself, as Belle was fretting so sadly that she could not leave her room.

Rotha was greatly disturbed when she heard this ; she felt as though it were selfish for her to be sitting alone and feeding on her grief while Mary had her own and her husband's trouble to bear, and was worn-out besides with attending on her sister. She thought how Gar would have acted in her place, and wept and prayed that she might have strength to do what he would have done.

She tried, and not ineffectually, to make some sort of beginning that same evening, and sent Meg round, laden with good things, and with a little pencilled line to Belle, in which she told her that she had not forgotten her, that she was thinking of them all from morning to night, that she sent them her dear love, and that she

would come round very soon, when she felt she could help and not distress them.

It so happened that as Meg left the house charged with Rotha's commissions she met the Vicar coming slowly towards Bryn, bound on much the same errand as herself. Meg turned back and let him in with her own key, so that he went in, as he wished it, quietly and unannounced. Rotha was sitting by the fire, in her black dress, looking white and weak, as though she had had an illness, but trying to interest herself in some work Meg had wished her to do. She started up when she saw the Vicar; her composure visibly left her, and she trembled violently. But he sat down beside her with his old kind smile—a little graver, perhaps—and questioned her so tenderly about her health, and what she had been doing with herself, that her agitation soon subsided, and she found herself talking to him, soothed in spite of herself by his calmness and sympathy.

And yet the Vicar looked worn and ill, and there were dark lines under his eyes which betokened sleeplessness and pain; he looked like a man who had battled through some great sorrow, and had attained peace. He could think now for others besides himself, and very tenderly and skilfully he set about performing the work which he had in hand—which was not only Rotha's consolation, as she found out afterwards.



But just now he seemed to have no thought but for her, and indeed the weary young face smote him with strange feelings of compassion.

"I have been thinking of you so often, Rotha," he said, "I have thought of the little Sister as one whom He hath loved and chastened, and who will always be dearer to us than ever now, because Gar loved her."

Ah, she has not heard the name since ; and her tears fall fast.

"Do you remember what I said that night about our dear boy—that he was not poor Gar, but happy Gar now? Ah, Rotha! think of it literally not figuratively, 'drawn out of many waters,' and so brought into the haven where he would be."

"I know," she added ; "but so young, and to die so terrible a death."

"Is it terrible, I wonder?" mused the Vicar. "They mount up to the heavens, they go down again to the depths, it may be their soul is melted because of trouble ; let us hope that bitter baptism, that weary chrism, were less terrible than our imagination paints them. Oh, Rotha ! never forget 'man's extremity is God's opportunity.' What if the angel of healing went down with him into the troubled waters ? Are not the darkness and the light both alike to Him ?"

"He was fit to die," said the girl, weeping ; "none more so, I know it."

"He would not like to hear us say so, and yet we may console ourselves that "this our brother, rests in sure and certain hope." When I speak of Garton I always think of some trusty young soldier of the Cross ; if any one loved his Lord, he did. It seemed to me," continued the Vicar, solemnly, "at least in my poor human judgment, as though he always strove to follow the advice of the Wise Man, 'Let thy garment be always white, and thy head lack no ointment.' He was not worldly wise, Rotha, hardly as clever as most men ; but it may be that of such is the kingdom of heaven."

Rotha still wept, but more silently ; these praises of her lost love were like a sweet, solemn dirge. "Oh, if we could only be like him !" she murmured out of a full heart.

"Yes, indeed," returned the Vicar ; "he has taught me many a lesson, has my poor boy, when he only thought he was learning from me. Once, when he was a very little child, Rotha, a mere infant at his mother's knee, he asked if he might not pray to die young ; and only a few years ago he told me that he always missed out that clause in the Litany, 'From sudden death, good Lord deliver us.' I had some difficulty in persuading him that it merely meant 'sudden, unprepared death.' Oh, Rotha ! when I think of his hidden life among us, a life so different from other men's, I feel sure that the Lord's mark was on him."

"I always said he was so good," faltered Rotha, "when all were against me; he was kind to me; even that dreadful evening at Nettie's, he came up to me and wished me good-night. Do you think I shall ever forget it? He was my best friend—the kindest, the truest—and he loved me. Oh, Mr. Ord, what shall I do—what shall I do?"

Not as other men would have done, did the good Vicar comfort her; he waited quietly till the pent-up feelings had had their vent; and then he took her hand and told her, what she knew already, and yet what it was always good to hear; how the sinless One had wept beside an open grave; and, how since then the tears of all mourners had been hallowed. He told her that she was right to weep for Garton, for a nobler, and a braver heart had never gone to its rest. And then, when he had said this, he asked her to listen to him, for he wanted to tell her about some one who was more unhappy than she, and when she looked at him inquiringly, he told her that it was Robert.

"Robert!" repeated Rotha, doubtfully; she was a little confused as to the Vicar's meaning. "Robert more unhappy than she?" Her sad face seemed to add "impossible."

"Yes, Robert, my brother, Rotha. When I saw him just now, I was almost shocked at his appearance. He looked as though he had gone with-

out food or rest for days : his eyes were bloodshot, his face quite haggard, and his hand felt almost as weak as yours. I could hardly speak to him, he startled me so."

"But why?" asked Rotha, quite bewildered ; she began to feel rather frightened at the Vicar's description. "Surely it could not be Gar's loss only? I did not know he loved him so!" she said, with quivering lips ; "I thought he could not understand him—that he made him impatient?"

"Perhaps so," returned the Vicar ; "but, Rotha, do not your very words give the clue to Robert's misery ? If he felt he had always been kind and patient to the poor boy, do you think his grief would be so unbearable ? You know the tenacity with which Robert clings to one idea ; well, he has got it into his head that it is all his fault that this has happened—that but for him Gar would never have gone away. He tells me that you said so, and he says that he never means to see you again."

"What?" exclaimed Rotha, sorely troubled, "not see me—Robert ! Mr. Ord, surely you misunderstood him, he could not have said that?"

"He not only said it, but I am afraid he meant it," replied Austin. "He says he has injured you past all hope of forgiveness, and that you will not care to see his face again. He was terribly vehement over it ; you know Robert's



way. What with this hopeless engagement of his, and Gar's death, and all his morbid feeling, I am afraid he will torment himself into a fever. He looks ripe for anything to-night ; and, Rotha, we can hardly bear any more trouble just now.—My dear child, where are you going ?”

“ I am going to Robert, of course. Come, Mr. Ord.”

“ But now—at this late hour of the evening ?”

“ Why not ? There is no time to be lost. Did you not mean me to go and see him ?”

“ Yes, certainly, when you are stronger. I only hoped you would volunteer ; but not to-night. You are not fit : and it is so cold and damp outside—snowing hard, too.”

“ Do you think the snow ought to prevent my going to Gar's brother ? Oh, Mr. Ord, how can you think such a thing ? Wouldn't Gar have gone ?” And the Vicar, secretly overjoyed at this unlooked-for success, offered no further objections.

It was a bitter night. The wind had subsided, but the air was full of the driving snow. The roads were already covered with it, and Rotha shivered and clung closer to the Vicar's arm ; for it seemed to her excited fancy as though the whole place was one great winding-sheet, and she was being pelted by frozen tears. She had no idea she was so weak till she stood at the Vicarage-

gate with trembling limbs, waiting for him to go in.

"Not there!" exclaimed the Vicar. "Robert is in his own house. He never stops long with us of an evening now." And opening the door, he looked back and beckoned her to follow.

Rotha was a little staggered when she found it was Robert's house that she was to enter, but she took courage when she remembered it had been Garton's home too. She followed the Vicar through the dark hall, and up the narrow staircase, wondering how she was to account for her intrusion, but perfectly convinced she was doing the right thing all the same. She waited while the Vicar tapped at the study-door, and followed him closely when the impatient "Come in" gave them a right to enter.

"I have brought a friend to see you, Robert," began the Vicar, cheerfully. "Rotha heard you were far from well, and she wished to accompany me, and judge for herself. Well, my dear fellow, what's the matter?"

"Rotha here—Rotha in this house!" burst out Robert. But Rotha stepped forward and laid her hand lightly on his shoulder.

"Yes, the little Sister has come to see you, Robert," speaking his Christian name for the first time so naturally. "She could not bear to think that Gar's brother was ill, and she might do him good, and yet keep away. I am very

weak ; may I sit down ?" she said, softly, taking the seat next him.

Ah ! there was no need to question the Vicar's account when she saw his face—haggard, thin, and miserable—scarcely like Robert Ord's face, with the roughened hair tossed back from his forehead, and the heavy, lustrous eyes, scarcely like Robert Ord's—the hot nerveless hand that she has taken with so sisterly a pressure.

He had been sitting, or rather crouching over the fire, when they had entered, and had hardly raised his head till Rotha's name was mentioned; a more desolate figure, amid more desolate surroundings, it was scarcely possible to see. The fire had burnt low, and was merely a mass of reddened embers ; a candle guttered on the table by the side of a smoky reading-lamp, and a solitary meal, untempting, badly laid, was untouched, amidst a wilderness of books, inkstands, and heterogeneous rubbish. Cinders lay curled up on Garton's empty chair, and beside her was his old felt hat, still left as he had last flung it down. How tenderly the Vicar took it up, and lifted the favourite cat on his knee !

" Don't touch it," said Robert, savagely ; " he left it there." He had made no sort of response to Rotha's friendly pressure—unless the weary stare he gave her may be called one—only when she took that seat beside him, he turned away his face with a sort of groan ; if this had come

to him, if her reproachful face were to haunt him, let him die, for what good was his life to him ?

" Robert, wont you speak to me ? I am not very well, and I have come to see you. Dear Mr. Ord, ask him not to turn from me, when I am so sorry for him—so very sorry for him."

" Don't waste your sorrow upon me," returned Robert, hoarsely, addressing her for the first time. " Austin, why did you bring her, when you knew that I never intended to see her again ? Haven't I darkened her life sufficiently without bringing her here ?"

" He did not bring me ; I came of my own accord," returned Rotha, trying bravely to restrain her tears. " I heard that you were ill and unhappy, and tormenting yourself ; and I said, ' If Gar's brother wants me he will never send for me ; I must go and tell him that it is all right—that it will never be wrong again between him and me.' "

" Rotha, are you mad ? Do you hear her, Austin ? Right between her and me ! when she knows that but for me that poor boy would never have gone away—would be happy now—yes, happy, and sitting where you are !"

" God would have it otherwise," replied the weeping girl. " Do not make it too hard for me to say, ' His will be done.' I will not blame you, Robert—no, not for worlds ; because you had pledged your word, and thought it right for him

to go. Could you know that he would never come back again—that we should see his face no more?"

"If I thought you could forgive me—" he began; but she interrupted him.

"There is nothing to forgive—nothing," she said, hurriedly. "To think I could cherish bitterness against his brother, when he loved me so dearly, and wanted me to be his wife! Oh, put away these terrible fancies, Robert; they are not worthy of you. Dear Mr. Ord, tell him that I will love him and be his sister, if he will only let me."

But the Vicar, making her a sign, moved quietly away; he thought it well that for a moment at least he should leave her to her woman's tenderness. It was well he did so, for he had scarcely left the room a minute before Robert, overwhelmed by his conflicting emotions, and worn-out by sleeplessness, broke into those convulsive, tearless sobs, which are so terrible to hear, a man's agony finding sudden vent, but giving no relief, and tearing his frame to pieces with useless throes.

Rotha threw up her hands when she heard those terrible sobs.

"Don't, Robert—don't! You are hurting me. I am not well enough to bear it. Don't make me sorry that I came. Oh, Gar! Gar! if you were only here to help me! What would you say to see him like this?"

"Have I frightened you, Rotha? Give me your hand a moment—there, it will pass directly. Oh, forgive me! I know you do—I feel you do; but if you knew what I have suffered! There, say something more to me; call me Robert again: it may exorcise the demon within me."

"Poor Robert, Garton's brother! There!—you are better now. You were ill; you could not help it. You have not slept for nights, perhaps, and that has shattered your nerves."

"I think I prayed not to sleep," he returned, shuddering. "Haven't you seen it all, Rotha? I have, over and over again. I dare not shut my eyes, for fear that poor boy's face should haunt me. Last night I saw him clearly: he had his hands clasped on his breast, and his dead eyes seemed to look me through and through."

"Hush!" said the girl, trembling; "it was only a dream. When I see him I always fancy there is a halo round his head."

"I cannot get his voice out of my ears. How long ago is it? hardly a fortnight, since he said, 'Good-bye, Robert; I hope you wont miss me much. Take care of yourself.'"

"Are you doing as he said?" returned Rotha, gently; "the Vicar tells me that you eat nothing. I can see you have not tasted anything this evening. No wonder your nerves are unstrung if you neglect yourself like this."

"What does that matter? What good am I to any one? Oh, if these three months were but over, and I could get away somewhere—anywhere, out of this place."

His agitation began to return, but she laid her hand on his arm and called him brother, softly, and then put aside her cloak, and told the Vicar when he came back, that she was not going to leave him just yet; and begged him to help her put things a little comfortable for him.

Did she guess what she was doing for him, when she laid aside her own trouble and weakness to minister to the stricken man, who a little while ago had been her greatest enemy? Years afterwards he told her that she had saved him from brain fever, for sleeplessness and want of food, and the morbid dwelling on one diseased idea, had driven him well-nigh mad. "A few hours more, another night of that terrible solitude would have done for me," he said; and Rotha, as she recalled the fierce fire of his eyes and the strangeness of his manner, felt within herself that she was right.

Some one besides Robert blessed the little Sister, as she moved softly about the comfortless room. In a little while she had coaxed the sullen embers into a cheerful blaze, the smoky lamp was re-trimmed, and the little black kettle sang merrily on the hob, the cricket came out

with a premonitory chirp, and Cinders, rousing herself in the belief that something was going on, jumped uninvited on Robert's knee, and purred loudly as she whisked her tail in his face.

The Vicar knew how to be useful, and had the table cleared in a trice. Old Sarah toddled up with more tempting-looking viands; and then he and Rotha sat down to break bread at Robert's table.

When had Robert ever failed in his duty as host before? But he failed now. He let Rotha bring his cup to him, and though he loathed the very sight of food, he ate and drank to please her. The Vicar told Mary afterwards that he almost shuddered at the haggardness and beauty of Robert's face; and that as Rotha sat beside him in her black dress, she looked, but for her uncovered hair, like a young Sister of Mercy.

Rotha did not say much till tea was over. She began to look somewhat spent, and the Vicar told Robert that he must take her away; but before she left she told him that she should be at the Vicarage to-morrow, and that she hoped he would be there. And then she whispered to him a few words, that he must never hurt her so again, for that it was all right between them—that she prayed for him every night, and pitied him from her heart.



Later on, just as Robert was beginning to relapse into his dreary brooding, and the cricket had gone in, and the fire had begun to burn very low, the door opened, and a round, boyish face, very sleepy, and no longer rosy, thrust itself into the room.

"Please, Uncle Robert, it's nearly eleven! aren't you ever going to bed? There's such a jolly fire in your room, and mother's mulled some wine, and it's all so comfortable. Do come and see."

"A fire in my room! Am I ill? Good gracious, Guy! Whatever brings you here at this time of night? Go home, lad, and go to bed, do."

"I am not going to bed till you do," maintained Guy, sturdily. "I've come to keep you company, Uncle Robert, and to see that your fire does not go out, and that you have proper food to eat, and that Cinders does not drink up all the cream. Holloa, Cinders, come here."

"But, Guy," remonstrated his uncle feebly, but cheered unconsciously by the lad's sleepy face, "this is all nonsense. I am not ill—at least, not very. Who sent you to me?"

"Who sent me? Oh, father and Rotha. I was asleep when they came in; but it was so jolly getting up. I heard Rotha tell him that you must not be left alone to feed on your own thoughts. Mother came in, and got all

comfortable ; but she is gone now. Come along to bed, Uncle Bob, there's a good fellow ; for I am awfully sleepy, and I wont budge an inch till you do."

Rotha knew what she was about when she persuaded the Vicar to wake up Guy, for the boy dearly loved his uncle, and for his sake would be ready to sacrifice anything. He sat on the bed, and chatted till the mulled wine, and the warmth, and the company had made Robert drowsy. Half-a-dozen times in the night he turned out of his warm bed, roused by Robert's restless mutterings—

"Is that you, Gar? I didn't mean it, Gar. I wouldn't have sent you away for worlds."

"No, of course not. Go to sleep, Uncle Bob ; its only Guy."

"Only Guy! My dear lad, are you sure of it ? I thought it was Gar ; give me your hand, boy—there." And Robert, turning over on his side, and muttering still, would fall into another short moaning sleep, and so on, until with the dawning day he slept soundly for a few hours.

CHAPTER X.

A MESSAGE FROM THE SEA.

“ I watch the clouds flit over the moon
 And wonder if it can be,
 That her tremulous eye looks tenderly down
 On those graves in the deep lone sea.

“ Are they safe from thy furious blast, O Wind,
 In the haven where they would be :
 Hast thou wafted them into the stormless shore,
 Where there shall be ‘no more sea?’

“ Was there prayer on their lips when the Master’s voice
 Rang over the deep that day,
 And the gallant ship with its freight of souls
 Sailed into the ‘far away?’

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

“ Hold it up before me, Father, Father !
 Hold it up before my closing eyes ;
 Dimly o’er my sight the death mists gather,
 And my way looks lonely through the skies.
 Loose the silver cord,
 ‘In hoc spero,’ Lord,
 Only this can lend me wings to rise.”

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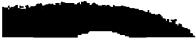
THE little Sister had not failed in her errand of mercy, and although at one time Robert had been very near it, he was saved from an attack of brain fever.

But for some time his nerves seemed completely shattered. He could make no pretence at cheerfulness now as he sat by Belle’s side ; nay, more, he could hardly rouse himself suffi-

ciently to talk to her. He was ill himself—irritable and restless. The whole atmosphere of the place was oppressive to him; and seeing how things were with him, he was almost feverishly anxious that there should be no unnecessary delay in the Torquay plans, and that Belle should be removed as soon as possible from the saddening influences that surrounded her.

Rotha was of the same opinion—Rotha, who had long ago taken up her old duties at the Vicarage, and was fulfilling them as heartily and unselfishly as ever.

Save that she was graver and paler, that her words were few, and her sunny smiles sweeter and sadder than of old, no one would have guessed that she had gone through a great trouble. Even Mary marvelled at her sometimes, and wondered what Austin meant by saying that the little Sister was growing older. Perhaps the Vicar knew that the brief summer beauty of freshness and colour had died out of the girl's face, never to return. It was a careworn young face now, too grave by half, as Meg knew when she came in wearily of an evening, and there was no need to force her cheerfulness any longer. Too grave, oh! far, far too sorrowful, when she crept to her window in the winter's night, to look up at the stars and wonder what Gar was doing; and to tell him, as though she felt him very near her, that she was doing all



she could for Robert and for them all ; but that she was so tired, so very, very tired.

Nobly as she had worked for them all, she had never so denied herself, so forgotten everything but their interest, as she had done now. It was almost heroic, the way in which she put aside her own grief to bear with Belle, to cheer Belle in what seemed to the others a tedious convalescence ; for she was better now, wonderfully better, as Robert said, and the doctors had given permission for her to be removed at once. The weather had become unusually mild ; there was no time to be lost, and Rotha, acting by her friend's advice, had sent Meg, with little more than a day's delay, off to Torquay to secure the most commodious lodgings that could be found, so that everything might be ready for an immediate start, while Mary, with many secret tears, set about the preparations for her sister's journey.

It was decided between Robert and the Vicar that the leave-takings were to be made as brief as possible—the doctors had laid a great stress on that ; anything like agitation or excitement was to be warded off as much as possible, and, after many consultations, it was arranged that Belle was not to know of it till the day before that appointed to start. It was no use prolonging her misery, and she had promised him to go whenever he wanted her, as Robert very justly

remarked ; and as soon as Rotha could tell him that her arrangements were completed, he would break it to Belle as quietly as possible.

So one morning Rotha came round to the Vicarage very early. There was no time to talk it over, for Robert had to leave by the next train to Thornborough, but he promised to be back in time to tell Belle that same afternoon.

It so happened that Belle was unusually well and cheerful that day ; she had coughed very little, and walked up and down the room frequently on Guy's arm without seeming tired. Poor Mary—who knew she was so soon to lose her—hardly dared to come near her all day for fear her tell-tale face should betray her, and yet could hardly bear her out of her sight a moment.

"She looks so pretty and so good, and she has got her old lovely smile," cried poor Mary, coming as usual for consolation to her husband ; "and she has actually laughed once at something Guy said. Oh, Austin ! it does seem so hard that I cannot go with her."

"My darling Mary, you know Rotha has offered you over and over again to go."

"Yes, I know ; but how could I leave you and the boys ? I could not do it, Austin ; and then there is Robert looking so ill, and Deb laid by, and Arty, and the parish !" And Mary put down her tired head on the Vicar's shoulder, as

though it were her only resting-place. It was well she did not see the look of pain that crossed her husband's face as he drew her tenderly within the shelter of his strong arm, and comforted her.

Robert came in presently, tired and harassed, and went up to Belle; he was with her alone for a long time, and then came down looking pale and utterly spent.

"Thank Heaven, that is over!" he said to Mary; "I don't think you will have any difficulty with her now. I have tried to be as gentle as I could with her, but I was obliged to be very firm too. But I am afraid it goes very hardly with her, poor girl."

Mary was afraid so too when she saw Belle. Belle was lying quite still—so motionless, indeed, that Mary fancied she was asleep, till she saw a tear rolling down the white sunken cheek and stooped to kiss it away, and then Belle opened her eyes.

"Is that you, Mary?" she cried; and then she suddenly stretched out her arms to her sister. "Oh, Mary, he is going to separate us! he is going to send me away, and I shall never see your dear face again."

But Mrs. Ord could not answer her, and for a little time the sisters mingled their tears together.

"You must get well and come back to me,

Belle ; I shall want you so much, oh ! so much, my pet," cried poor Mary, kissing Belle's fair hair, her hands—even her dress. "I can't bear to think you are going so far from me, and that Rotha will do everything for you and not I."

Belle shook her head, and then began stroking Mary's face, half dreamily.

"Do you remember, when we were little children together, Mary, when we slept in the great sloping attic that looked out on the apple-trees, and how I, the younger and weaker little sister, Mary, would never go to sleep till you had put your arm round me and said, 'Good-night, God bless you, Belle?' Do you remember it, Mary?"

"Remember it, darling!—too well, too well; but why do you ask?" sobbed Mary, melted by this tender recollection.

"Because I was thinking—don't cry, Mary; I can't bear to see you cry—I was thinking how when that comes—I should like you to put your arm round me, and say that over again. It would make it feel less terrible, and more like going to sleep if you will only say 'Good-night, God bless you, Belle!' as you did then." And drawing Mary's face down on the pillow, she told her not to fret; for she did not mean to make her unhappy, for if God heard her prayers she would surely come back, if only to

lay her head once more on that faithful breast.

A more beautiful morning had rarely dawned than that on which Belle took her sorrowful departure from Blackscar. Robert was to go with her to the station, and Guy had also pleaded to be allowed to accompany his uncle; but the rest of the boys and Austin and Mary came no farther than the Vicarage gate. Mary had hardly slept all night, and her red and swollen eyes bore witness to the tears she had shed. It went to the Vicar's heart to see how the sisters clung to each other at the last moment.

"Good-bye, Mary; one more kiss, Mary. Good-bye—good-bye, my darling sister."

"Dear Mary, let her go. Robert is waiting to lift her into the carriage."

"You hear what Austin says, Belle, darling; you must go now. Good-bye, my precious, and God Almighty bless you."

And Robert, gently disengaging Belle from her sister's arms, lifted her into the carriage and placed her by Rotha's side.

But even then, while Austin was giving her his brotherly farewell and blessing, Belle leant across him and held out her arms again to her weeping sister.

"One more kiss, Mary darling—one more kiss, my own Mary," and hung about her

neck, till Austin gently, but firmly, put his arm round his wife and drew her away.

She scarcely spoke a word after that till Robert took leave of her in the railway-carriage ; but she was as white as death, and trembling all over when he took her in his arms.

"It is not good-bye, Belle, you know. I am coming very soon."

"Yes, yes ; the sooner the better, Bertie ; but it will be good-bye then." And as he stooped over and kissed her with some emotion, she only looked at him with strange, wistful eyes. "It will be good-bye then, Bertie, will it not?"

It was a long desolate journey, and scarcely less so to Rotha than Belle, and a heavy responsibility to the young nurse ; and it was a greater relief than she could have imagined to see Meg's friendly face awaiting them at the station : it seemed to give a homishness to the strange surroundings, and even Belle, though frightfully exhausted, smiled faintly when she saw Mrs. Carruthers, and held out her hand with a feeble welcome.

Rotha wrote a tolerable account to Mary the next day ; she said, of course Belle was suffering the reaction of excitement and unusual exertion, but that in other ways she seemed much the same ; and a few days after that she was able to give even a better report. Belle had

recovered from the fatigue of her journey and was able to sit up and look about her a little. They liked what they could see of Torquay, though of course Belle had not yet gone out; but they had very pleasant apartments, in the house of a widow lady. The rooms were all on the first floor, and opened into each other, and Belle's sitting-room was especially pleasant, as it looked over a lovely old garden, with a patch of sunny road beyond, planted with rows of trees. Rotha said the place where their house was situated was called "Torquay within the Hills," and she described the air as perfectly delicious. Mary had been guided in her choice by the advice of Dr. Vivian, who had recommended this locality as singularly adapted to all pulmonary complaints.

Dr. Vivian had been to call on Belle once or twice, and Rotha told Mary that he seemed to understand Belle's complaint thoroughly; he had spoken most cheerfully to his patient, and had recommended them a great many pleasant walks and drives. Belle was to see Bishopstowe, and Babbicombe Bay, and Warren Hill, and Daddy Hole Common. She was to go out every fine morning, and see all the objects of interest in Torquay. Rotha wrote amusing accounts of the trawling with long nets in Torbay, the walks they had in the Torwood Road, and their visit to the quaint little fishing-town of Brixham. Belle had a little pony carriage, Rotha added,

and was greatly interested by the novelty of everything around her.

Mary used to read those letters to the Vicar with tears in her eyes. "Do you think she will get better, Austin? I have heard of people living for years and years with only one lung; and perhaps the other is not so much diseased as Mr. Greenock thought." But the Vicar only shook his head; he noticed how Rotha's letters were filled with descriptions of scenery, and how little she said about Belle herself. The doctor's visits were touched on very lightly; she always spoke of Belle as being happier or brighter, but never once said that she was really better. One day the Vicar shut himself up in his study and wrote a long letter to Rotha, which she answered by return of post. But he never showed either the letter or the answer to Mary; but for a long time afterwards he was very grave, and went about as though he had something heavy in his thoughts.

Robert was in London just then on business connected with his firm, and it so happened that something very strange befell him there, of which Rotha was to hear shortly. One day, when they had been about three weeks at Torquay, and Rotha, in spite of the doctor's prognostications, was beginning to cheat herself into the belief that Belle was better, she was sitting in her own room, while Belle was having her



noonday rest, when a large official-looking document in Robert's handwriting and the postmark London, was put into her hands.

She had not an idea what it contained, and was opening it listlessly enough, when she caught sight of a never-to-be-forgotten cramped handwriting, and a moment afterwards something lay sparkling at her feet. With a low cry she snatched it from the ground, and sank back half fainting into her seat.

Do you know what it is that she devours with such hungry tears and kisses—which she presses alternately to her bosom and her lips?

There is the ring that she placed on Garton's finger, with the diamond cross that he kissed so reverentially, and the words “*In hoc spero,*” traced round on the blue enamel; and there on her lap lies the “message from the sea.”

Not for a long time—not till she has read it over and over through her blinding tears, not till she has found Robert's note and mastered its contents, is the bewildering mystery cleared up; not till Meg has come to her aid, and read it slowly and patiently again and again, can she understand how it has come to her—out of the very shadow and blackness of death.

And yet how clearly Robert explained it all.

“I am sending you something very precious, Rotha,” he wrote. “Heaven grant you may

receive it safely. I am sending the very letter he was writing to you just before the terrible concussion took place—the very ink was wet, you can see, as he thrust it hurriedly into his bosom ; you can tell that by the half-obliterated words at the end.

“ How he gave the ring and letter with his last dying love, you must read in another man’s words ; I have taken it down myself from his lips, just as he told it me, and remember he was the very man who saw our Gar die. Another time when we meet perhaps I will tell you by what strange chance I lighted on him in this great city ; and how in a lonely coffee-house, under the shadow of the mighty dome of St. Paul’s, I heard word for word as you have it here how our poor Gar perished like the hero and the gentleman he was.”

Will she ever weary of the sweet perusal ? She spreads the crumpled paper out again—blotted, half defaced with ink, and in some parts scarcely legible. She reads once and yet once again her “ message from the sea.”

“ My darling Rotha,” it began, “ I am sitting down in my cabin to write to you by the light of a very smoky lamp ; the rest of the passengers are just thinking of retiring to rest, and only the watch is on deck. Just now I went up to see what chance there was of our beating down the Channel to-morrow, for you will be surprised



to hear that though it is Sunday, we are only now anchored off Dungeness. But the pilot tells me that the wind is still ahead. We have had ill luck enough already to begin with: to think we are still here on anchorage, and it is Sunday evening.

"But I have not sat down to complain, but just to let you know how things are going. I told you once that I was a bad hand at a letter, and I am afraid you will agree with me, for I don't think I have made much of a beginning, though I mean to send little more than a message to Rube.

"It is not more than five days since I said good-bye, but I feel as heavy-hearted as though it were five months. I know now what people mean by home-sickness, for I am just sickening for the sight of one dear face that is all the world to me. It is not always easy for a man to express what he feels. I have tried over and over again to tell you how much I loved you, but I never could; and now I think that I shall die before you know what you are to me.

"That is a strange sentence, and I don't know why I have written it; but it is Sunday evening, and my heart is just as heavy as lead. I can't help feeling as though some great gulf lies between us. It may be because I have never been far away from home before, that I am so low and miserable.

"I have been thinking of you so much, my Darling. I don't think you are ever out of my mind for a single minute. You don't know what a man's love is when he gives it all to one woman, as I have given it to you. I have often said to myself, 'She will never understand it,' but if God grant that I ever make her my wife, I think she will feel it then.

"Do you remember, sweet Heart, my telling you that I was not clever, and how indignantly you assured me that such a thing should never be mentioned in connection with you and me. I have blessed you for those words over and over again ; and yet all the same I am rejoiced to think that you are cleverer, and better, and wiser than I. Do you think I would have it otherwise ? Only put your little hand in mine, Rotha—the little soft hand whose touch I remember still—and I think I can follow those dear feet wherever they climb.

"Do you remember, too, my telling you that your love was not to be compared to mine, and that perhaps some day you might give me all you have in you to give ? Not for worlds would I have even that otherwise ; how could you misunderstand me so ? The very thought of the treasures that yet are unwon, only nerves me to yet stronger efforts. How could you, being what you are, Rotha, give all at once to such an one as I ? No ; dearly as you love me, you could



not give me all. One day you shall tell me your thoughts, and I will try and understand them, and then perhaps I shall be able to tell you what I mean.

"There is a little deaf-and-dumb boy on board, Rotha, that somehow reminds me of you. I suppose the eyes of most mutes are eloquent, but I have never seen any like this boy's. They are brown and soft, and have strange, appealing looks in them, like a dumb animal's in pain.

"You know my fancy for boys. This one has taken my fancy strongly. He is such an afflicted little creature, and without parents, and he and his mulatto nurse are bound like myself for Buenos Ayres; on such a long journey we are sure to become well acquainted" (Ah, Gar! on such a long journey; aye, along the Valley of the Shadow of Death).

"He takes to me already. You must tell Rube not to be jealous. Dear old Rube! he must not have a boyish rival in my heart. To-day, he sat beside me on the poop for hours, holding the lappel of my coat, and looking quite contented. Tell Rube his name is David—but he won't be like the first David to me—who was, as one may say, the captive of my own bow and spear, for I suppose, humanly speaking, I saved his life. Dear lad! he has rewarded me for it over and over again.

"And tell him, with my love, that I hope he

has forgiven me for not bidding him good-bye, and tell him to remember me in his prayers every night. There's a word too I might say to my torments, Guy and Rufus, but it is getting late, and I suppose I must turn in.

"I shall finish this to-morrow ; but now, God bless you, my own dear love—and—" Then came some blurred, unintelligible words, and then Death wrote Finis.

Oh, how the girl wept and smiled over her treasure, and then hiding it in her bosom, read in Robert's handwriting, traced boldly on the thin foreign paper, the sad particulars of Garton's death.

And this is what it said, taken down from the lips of the sailor, Richard Martin :—

"I was the chief mate of that there unfortunate *Phoenix*, sir, and have served under Captain Murray for, I should say, nigh upon five years, and though I say it, a finer seaman never commanded a finer vessel.

"Well, the vessel that we left off Dungeness with nothing but the masts standing up out of the water, left the London Docks about nine o'clock on Wednesday morning, bound for Buenos Ayres, and with, I should say, about three hundred souls on board ; some of them belonging to a gang of navvies that were going out to work some contract, the rest of them saloon passengers, and the crew.



"But you don't want to put down a lot of sailor's yarn ; but just to tell that there lady about the unfortunate man who put the letter and the ring in my hands when we had climbed up upon the pile of boats and were holding on together for dear life. Yes, sir, I quite understand you; and I hope you'll cut me short if I spin it out ; for as sure as my name's Richard Martin, I'll tell that poor young lady all I know.

"I recollect his coming on board with you, sir, for I was just hauling that coil of rope, when he stepped across the gangway ; a tall, dark sort of a chap, with the cut of a parson about him, but a fine figure of a man too.

"He was a civil sort of person—none of your fine gentlemen, who wont give a word to a rough seaman. He used always to say 'Good-morning, mate,' and sometimes he would stop and have a bit of chat with me ; it seemed to cheer him up, for at other times he looked so downhearted, that I often said to myself 'that young man has left his sweetheart,' for I kind of know how a man will carry on when he leaves a woman behind him.

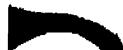
"I remember too that I got it into my head that he was going to be a parson. I thought so when he reproved two of my chums for swearing. I recollect him sitting down and talking to them in a simple, hearty sort of way, and how when Joe Greene—he who had a widowed mother—slunk

away fairly ashamed of himself, he followed him and shook hands with him, and told him that he would be a fine fellow if he would break himself of that evil habit. That's Joe Greene, sir, that you saw alongside of me in the bar, and a more sobered chap I never set eyes on ; as he should be, when he was saved out of all those poor drowning wretches.

" There was a deaf-and-dumb child on board, under charge of a mulatto nurse, going out to some relations who lived in Buenos Ayres ; and it was odd what a curious fancy that afflicted little creature seemed to take to that young gentleman. Joe Greene was pointing them both out to me that same day, it was Sunday I remember : ' That's a simple sort of chap, Martin,' he says, ' to let that child sit alongside of him for hours like that.' I remember his saying that now, though I made no sort of observation at the time.

" But I am taking up your time, you will say, and I have not told you how it came about that we were lying at anchor so snugly on Sunday evening, when we had left the London Docks early on Wednesday morning.

" Well, we ran down to Gravesend all right ; and then we found the wind dead against us, and had to lay by till Friday. On Friday we had middling weather, but the wind was still rising, so we towed down the Channel ; but the



pilot passing word we cast anchor of Dungeness.

"Here we were snug enough, and the watch being set, the rest of us turned in to our hammocks, and I for one was soon fast asleep.

"Well, sir, all at once I was wakened by an awful crash, just as though it were the Day of Judgment, and every rock that was on the earth was rent to pieces ; and immediately afterwards I heard the Captain sing out, 'All hands to the pumps.'

"Well, sir, it weren't no sort of use ; for, as I heard it afterwards from one of my mates, who saw it all from first to last, a great lubberly steamer had cut the *Phænix* asunder amidships, and there was a big hole in the ship's quarter, which was letting in the English Channel on us.

"But, sir, it is all in the papers, and you don't want me to go over it again ; but I wish to say that nothing that the papers can say will give you an idea of the horrors of the scene. When I rushed up on deck, it wasn't only the women who came swarming up the ladders shrieking fit to tear your heart to pieces—it was the men too, half-maddened by mortal terror, who crowded round the boats fighting for their very lives.

"Well, sir, you've read it all ; you know how that there vessel sheered off regardless of our cries ; how the cannon would not go off and we sent up rockets for no manner of good ; and you

know how our Captain stood by the boats and tried to save the women.

"Bless your life, sir, I did what I could, but it was like fighting with savages, and in the dark too: the wrong people got into the boats and could not be made to leave them; the men, the navvies especially, were like mad, and wouldn't obey orders. I could see we were doomed, and the Captain, he says to me, 'Martin, save yourself—you've got a wife and seven children ashore, but my place is here.' I wish the papers had said a little more about the Captain, for if any one ever died at his post our Captain did."

"Well, Joe Greene and I were struggling at the boats between the main and mizen masts, but bless your heart it was no manner of use, for we couldn't move them, and up comes that young gentleman you say was your brother, sir. 'The ship's going down very fast,' says he, and seeing nothing for it we three jumped on to the pile of boats.

"Joe Greene, he splutters out, 'I wish some one would tell my poor old mother I was thinking of her now;' and the gentleman, he says, holding out his hand, 'Martin,' he says, 'if you live to get on shore, and I hope with all my heart that you will, will you send this letter and this ring to the young lady? You'll see the direction written inside;' but lor, sir, there was no direction at all. 'And tell her,' says he, with a sort of sob, 'that

the thought of her is making me strong to die, and that even at this minute I am thinking of her and bidding God bless her with my latest breath.'

" And I said, ' All right mate, but hold on if you're a man, and we may be picked up after all,' for he was a plucky sort of chap, and did not seem to be holding on at all.

" Well, sir, he might have been saved like the rest of us, and that's the hardest part I am coming to, but that there negro woman I told you of began howling and screaming, as indeed most of the other poor creatures were, and begging us to save the child. So the Gentleman, he says, ' I can't stand this, Martin ; give me a hand, my good fellow : I must go and fetch the child ;' and I said, ' Not for worlds, mate. Don't leave these ere boats.' But he did not hear me, and just swung himself down, and I saw him lift the boy in his arms and try to get back to us.

" You'll excuse me a moment, sir, but it makes even a rough seaman feel soft to think of a brave man caught in the net like that. Joe Greene, he screamed out, and then I saw the sea rise to the level of the poop, and then the white foam seemed to sweep him away, with the child still clinging round his neck ; and I can't help thinking, sir, that somehow that little child will just lead him by the hand into the kingdom of heaven.

" You don't want to know any more, or how Joe Greene and I got hold of some rigging, and how we were picked off it by the lugger *Betsy Jane*; or how I got up to London and saw you, sir, in this same coffee-house. But I hope you'll tell that young lady that I've done my best by her, as sure as my name is Richard Martin."

A postscript by Robert added, "I have seen Joe Greene, and he has confirmed Martin's account; but I think it needs no comment on my part, save to say that to our brave Gar the words may surely be applied, 'Inasmuch as ye did it even unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto Me.' And once more, 'And a little child shall lead them.' "

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE DARK MOUNTAINS.

“For me, my heart that erst did go
 Most like a tired child at a show,
 That sees through tears the mummers leap,
 Would now its wearied vision close,
 Would childlike on His love repose
 Who giveth His belovëd sleep.”

“And friends, dear friends, when it shall be
 That this low breath is gone from me,
 And round my bier ye come to weep,
 Let one, most loving of you all,
 Say, ‘Not a tear o'er her must fall,
 He giveth His belovëd sleep.’”

E. B. BROWNING.

THREE weeks passed very quietly and smoothly with Rotha and her charge. Belle had grown more reconciled to her banishment, and seemed to take interest in her new surroundings—the delicious balmy air, the pleasant drives, could not fail to soothe the poor invalid after her long and tedious confinement to the four walls of the Vicarage ; there she had been fearful to pass even from one room to the other ; but here the sunshine and soft air tempted her to many a short stroll on Rotha’s supporting arm, while the very sight of the wild flowers which even at this season of the year nestled in sheltered hollows,

the long, green lanes, the enchanting views, were sources of enjoyment to the weary eyes from which they had been so long debarred.

True, her spirits were still variable, and there were times when the old sullen depression seemed to return with tenfold power, but these moods were rare. In general she was very patient, deeply grateful for any little attentions on Rotha's part, and touched sometimes almost to emotion with the unfailing kindness with which Meg and she nursed her.

But as it is with the flame of a candle as it gutters to its close, before the feeble spark is extinguished, so was it with the treacherous disease to which Belle was slowly succumbing. From the first Dr. Vivian had held out no definite hopes of recovery, though he had once declared that Belle's youth and constitution were in her favour; but since his second visit he had never repeated this. He had spoken very cheerfully to his patient, and even to Rotha, but it had struck the latter that his cheerfulness was forced, and that he kept his real opinion to himself; and very soon she was strengthened in this conviction, when she was sure that he looked upon Belle's case as entirely hopeless, and that his skill was merely directed to soothe and alleviate the few short weeks or months that still remained to her. It was very difficult to realize this sometimes when she looked at Belle. Never

had Belle looked more lovely than now, when her cheeks were glowing with diseased colour, and her eyes brilliant with the fever that was wasting her so imperceptibly. But this condition of things could not last.

On the day after Rotha had received her precious letter, a sudden and alarming change was apparent in the sick girl: all at once there was a decay of the vital powers; the deep, tight cough returned with increased violence, and emaciation set in; exertion became impossible; every moment brought on the laboured breath, the rapid pant; a fainting-fit of long duration added to her nurse's anxiety. In a day or two Meg was obliged to lift her in her strong arms from her bed to her couch in the adjoining room; at night her restlessness and suffering were so great that one or other remained in close attendance by her side. After three or four days of suspense and watching, Dr. Vivian told Rotha that every symptom of the most rapid decline had set in, and that it was impossible to say how long or how short a time she might linger.

Under these circumstances Rotha wrote off to the Vicar, and implored him to send Mary at once to her dying sister, and to communicate the bitter tidings to Robert; but great was her consternation at receiving the Vicar's reply. In it he told her—and with what grief she might imagine for herself—that his dear wife was ill with an

attack of pleurisy. She had caught cold one bitter day in going about her district, and had neglected to take proper precautions, and fretting about her sister had retarded her recovery. She had been confined to her bed some days when he wrote, but they had neither of them let Rotha know for fear of adding to her anxiety. Under these circumstances he had decided in keeping from Mary the knowledge of her sister's dangerous condition, at least for the present. He told Rotha, to her further grief, that Robert had been despatched to Glasgow on important business, which would detain him for the next four or five days; and that unless there were any immediate danger it would be extremely difficult to recall him; but he charged Rotha to telegraph if any alarming change should take place.

"It seems as though in becoming one of us," he concluded, "you have come into a larger share of trouble than of joy; we are walking among the shadows now, little Sister, or it may be in the very fire of the furnace, and that seven times heated. Ah, well for us, my child, if amid its exceeding fierceness we may discern the form of One who walked before us in the fiery way, and know it as the form of the Son of God."

The Vicar's letters, always so wise and tender, were Rotha's great comforts, and just now she needed something especially bracing to nerve her

to the bitter duty that lay before her—that of acquainting Belle with her hopeless condition.

She was only waiting for an opportunity, but it came soon.

"Does Dr. Vivian say I am better, Rotha?" asked Belle one day, when the doctor had just been paying his morning visit.

"Why do you ask, dear Belle?" returned Rotha, quickly averting her face from the invalid.

"Because I think I feel so," replied the sick girl. "I have not coughed half so much this morning, and the pain has left me. You don't answer, Rotha; you don't look at me! Does he—does he think me worse?" And Belle raised herself on her elbow and looked at Rotha anxiously.

"He does not think you better," returned Rotha, in a low voice.

"Not better!—that means worse, of course. Come here, Rotha. Has Dr. Vivian said anything—anything that I ought to know? Oh, Rotha," with a sort of despair as she saw her face, "it is not that—it is not dying, is it?" And as Rotha knelt down and folded her silently in her arms, she repeated, in a frightened voice, "Don't tell me—I can't bear it—that I have got to die yet."

"Dear Belle, darling Belle, try and say 'His will be done'; it is the only thing that can make it easy."

"I can't," repeated Belle, in a choked voice, "I can't—it would be a lie to say it. What have I done, that it should all be made so hard for me? Just as I was beginning to hope too that I was getting better, and it was only those dreadful winds that were killing me."

"I thought you knew it, Belle," returned Rotha, gently. "You seemed as though you did when you said good-bye to them all."

"Knew it! Of course, I always knew it. Did I not always say I was doomed? But it does not make it easier when it comes. I wanted a little longer time 'to get used to the idea—to—oh! Rotha!—it isn't the knowing it—that was long ago; it is the terror, the awfulness of approaching dissolution—the—the—oh, I can't talk of it." And overwhelmed by her emotion, the unhappy girl clasped her wasted arms round Rotha, and held her fast.

"Oh, Belle! this is dreadful! Heavenly Father, what am I to say to her? Help me to comfort her," prayed Rotha, with streaming eyes. Then aloud, "Oh, if the Vicar were only here—if you would see a clergyman!" But Belle shook her head.

"It would be no use, Rotha; it is not that. I suppose I have gone to church oftener than most people; you forget I have lived in a clergyman's house many years, and that Austin has often talked to me, but I never would open my

heart to any of them—it is not in me. You may send any one you choose, but you must not ask me to confide in a stranger." And Rotha, knowing her strange wayward nature, dared not press the point.

"If Robert were only here," began Belle presently, in calmer tones, "I think he would do me good. No clergyman could be better than Robert; you have no idea how beautifully he talks. Oh, Rotha, there it is—the sin, and the stumbling-block. I have made Robert my idol, and now God is punishing me for it."

"'Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth,'" returned Rotha, using unconsciously the Vicar's words.

"Whom He loveth, yes—but is it not idolatry all through the Bible that He condemns? Listen to me, Rotha. You shall hear what I have never told any one before—not even him. For six years—it is nearly six, is it not? since he first saw me at the Vicarage?—all that time I have never had a thought apart from him—never once—never once."

"Dear Belle, you could not help it, I suppose."

"No, I could not help it; you would have said so if you had seen him then. You can hardly judge now, he is so different, and he has shown you nothing but his faults. But if you had seen him as I have, admired, beloved, sunny-

hearted and radiant with happiness, I think you would not recognise my Bertie in the careworn Robert you know."

"I can believe it, Belle; there are traces of it still. I think you will bear me witness that I have always done justice to Robert's nobler qualities."

"Ah, he was always noble, but he is not what he was—poor Robert!—when he gave it all up for me—for me"—and for a moment a mournful smile passed over the sunken face—"when he told me he would rather have his beautiful Belle than his aunt's riches. But the beauty faded, Rotha, and he grew warped and weary, and then he began to misunderstand me and doubt my love; and at last it was all doubt and wretchedness."

"My poor, Belle! But hush, this is doing you harm." For the hard, heavy pants interrupted her every word. But Belle persisted—

"Let me, I can't often talk, and anything is better than thinking—even this;" as the distressing cough rung its hollow knell. "I sometimes think I am not so much to blame after all; for if he had let me do what I wished—earn my own living, I mean—I should not have lived all those years dwelling on one idea, and growing morbid over my very love; and then I began to be afraid I should tire him."

"Belle, dear, it is all over now."



"Ah, it was all over for me a long time ago—what I have gone through since I knew first that I should never be his wife, never make him happy—that I was doomed—doomed——" And Belle covered her face with her hands and wept bitterly.

It was a terrible trial to Rotha, and one which the girl with her lifelong habits of submission and her simple faith could hardly understand. "Oh, Belle! it is not like that—it is like going home," she said presently, when Belle, exhausted but unconvinced, had required comparative calmness; "when the Master calls, Belle, it is hard the children are not ready."

"I am not ready," returned Belle, with a shiver. "From a child I have dreaded death—and I dread it now. Oh, Rotha! what can you say to comfort me, when you know you would not be in my place for worlds?"

It was the first time that she had seen Rotha break down, but she broke down utterly now. "Oh, would I not Belle? Gar! Gar! would I not? Oh, the pain and trouble of life," she moaned; "the pain and the loss and the trouble." And for a little while she could only hide her face in Belle's pillow.

This was the beginning of many a sad hour, and many a terrible conflict, before the tormenting spirit had been cast out, and Belle lay upon her bed, white and weary, worn to a shadow, but

peaceful as a little child ; and it came to her in this wise.

One night when she was unusually restless, and her few words only testified to the sore disquietude of her mind, Rotha sat down by her side, and read to her the last two chapters of Revelations, thinking the glowing descriptions of the city with its golden streets and gates of pearl might soothe the tortured imagination of the poor sufferer ; but Belle only listened with contracted brow, and when Rotha had finished, she said—

“ It does me no good—it makes me worse. All the time you have been reading I have been thinking of the shining streets, and the white-robed multitude that no man can number walking up and down them. But I don’t see myself there, Rotha.” She paused, and then, impeded by her broken breath, went on. “ That is all glory, but unattainable glory, it seems to me. There’s the river and the dark mountains to pass first—and oh,” panted the dying girl, “ why have the greatest saints prayed so earnestly for the gift of final perseverance, if there be no conflict, no terrible struggle at the last ? ”

“ Oh, Belle,” cried Rotha, with a pity that amounted almost to agony, “ what is the meaning of faith if we cannot trust Him then ? ” For it seemed to her as though Belle’s stern and



mystical religion had become strongly imbued with the gloomy notions of the Calvinists. "These doubts and terrors are infirmities, not sins ; nay, did not even He, the Sinless One, in His human nature, shrink from the mysterious hour of His dissolution ?" And then, turning to another page, she read the story of Gethsemane, and how, under the grey olive-trees, the God-Man wrestled in the bloody sweat of His most bitter passion ; how He drank even to the dregs all the concentrated pain and terror that humanity could feel. "The cup that my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?"—Then she closed the sacred volume, and laid it aside.

But long after Belle had fallen into an uneasy slumber did Rotha, on her bended knees, pray that the dark hour might cease, and the weary heart find its true rest. Never had she prayed so passionately, so urgently ; and when she rose at last from her knees, it was with the peaceful assurance that she would be heard and answered.

Belle slept at intervals through the night, but nothing passed between them till the following afternoon. Belle was very quiet, and unusually silent ; but every now and then her eyes rested on Rotha with a strange, wistful expression, and when Meg left them together once she beckoned her to come close.

"Closer, dear Rotha. I am very weak to-

day, and I thiuk the end is not so very far off. Rotha, I want to ask you something. Were you praying for me last night?"

Rotha pressed her hand, but did not answer.

"I knew you were, dear—I felt it. Ah, Rotha, it is all gone."

"What is gone, dear Belle?"

"The fear of death, the trouble and the misery. I can see clearly, oh! so clearly; and I know now that He is good. It came to me in a dream—nay, a vision rather. You don't mind my speaking so slowly and painfully, do you, dear? But I want to tell you what I saw when you were praying for me last night."

"Dear Belle, I am listening."

"I think I must have been asleep, for I woke and saw you kneeling by the bed; the candle was shining full on your hair, and I remember I tried to put out my hand and touch it, like this. And then all at once I fainted, or seemed to faint, and when I came to myself I was standing in a narrow place shut in by rocks, and before me was a deep, sullen river, black and full of hideous shadows, and lapping to my very feet; and all on the other side was hidden by a grey cloud, luminous as though the light were shining through it—like a wall of mist, only clearer. And I thought that I was obliged to cross the river, and that I was standing on the

brink crying and wringing my hands, and shuddering in the icy blast that seemed to sweep over the waters; and all behind me were dark mountains and rocks that seemed to shut out the very sky, and a horror of great dark fell upon me.

"And as I stood weeping there, the cloud suddenly became more luminous, and a voice behind it said, 'When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee, and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee.' And I seemed to answer the voice, 'But what if the sullen waters sweep me away, within sight of the luminous cloud?' And it said again, 'Fear not, for I am with thee. I have holden thee by the right hand: thou art mine.' And suddenly the scales seemed to fall from my eyes, and I could see that multitudes besides myself were crossing the river every minute, but that nearly every one had a small raft in the form of a cross. And immediately I seemed to hear the words—'Therefore do men commit their lives unto a small piece of wood, and passing through the rough sea on a frail vessel are saved.' And as I listened I found myself launched on the small bark with the others; and immediately the winds seemed to subside, and the waves ceased their roaring, and the light grew stronger and clearer, and my little raft floated nearer to the far-off shore. And out of the cloud I seemed to

hear voices like the sound of many waters, and this is what they said:—‘ He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad, because they be quiet ; and so He bringeth them to their desired haven.’ And immediately I awoke.”

“ Oh, Belle, what a beautiful dream !” intervened Rotha. But Belle, looking upwards and posed her wasted hands reverently together, said—

“ No, not a dream ; but true—all true. I know now that ‘ His grace is sufficient, that His strength is made perfect in weakness.’ ”

A few hours after this, Robert was returning to his house, jaded from a long hurried journey, when he found the following telegram awaiting him—

“ Sinking fast ! Come at once. No time to lose if you wish to see her alive.”

Half an hour afterwards he was travelling as fast as steam would carry him to Devonshire.

“ Rotha, do you think he will be here in time ?” murmured the dying girl. And Rotha stooped over and wiped the clammy brow. Those who were standing round her knew that it was the beginning of the end.

“ I hope so. I pray to heaven that it may be so, dear Belle.”

“ I should like to see him again,” returned

Belle, faintly. The breathing was growing more laboured every moment, and the sharpened face was grey with approaching death.

"I do not want to die till he comes, if it be His will. Read that once again, dear Rotha." And Rotha, struggling for calmness, repeated again Keble's glorious Evening Hymn—or Hymn for the Dying, as it might be called—"Abide with me":—

"Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes,
Shine through the mist, and guide me through the skies."

"Rotha, I can hear a faint step. Open the door, quick!" Ah, she has heard it. Faithful to the last, she hears Robert's footstep, and knows it to be his. As he enters the room and falls down on his knees beside her couch, she nestles into his arms with a low cry of content—"Oh, Bertie, Bertie, I shall die happy now!"

"My darling Belle—my poor girl—my own, own Belle!"

"Dear Bertie! you must not grieve like this. It is better so. I am so tired, and He is giving me rest—rest—rest." The laboured breath became more difficult—the words fainter and more broken. "Where is Rotha? I have bidden her good-bye, and blessed her long ago,—her and Meg, too. But now it is getting dark.

"Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes—
The cross——"

Her eyes were fast glazing now. He puts

his ear to her lips that he may catch the last dying sounds. What is that she says ?

" It is growing late, Mary—cold too. Put your arm closer round me. There, good-night. God bless you, dear ! Who says Bertie is here ?" And as he held her closer, and called her by her name, those who were near saw that she tried to kiss him with her dying lips, and failed. One moment, and Rotha gently lifted her from his arms and laid her down.

" And I heard a voice say, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord. Yea, saith the Spirit, for they shall rest from their labours."

It was over—the brief life, the weary restlessness, the suffering ; those who loved her best said, weeping, it was better so, for the feverishness and the weariness were over, and she rested at last, and rested well.

They took the poor remains back to Kirkby ; that was Rotha's doing, for they knew it was the spot where she would most love to lie.

" If it be possible, let me be taken back," she had said to Rotha some hours before the fatal change came on, and let them carry me under the old lich-gate, where I have often walked with him." And on Rotha making her a solemn promise that her wish should be fulfilled in this, she pressed her hand gratefully, and went on—

" I have always wished to be there when my



time came. There is a corner by the west-door where I have often stood of an evening looking over at the distant furnaces, and listening to the waves rippling low down on the shore. You will know the place ; it is where Ned Blake was buried, the boy who was my favourite Sunday scholar, and who was drowned last year ; it feels so high and breezy up there, and the wind sweeps so freshly over the graves, and it is just by the little path where the choir-boys go to and fro. And, Rotta, if you and the lads ever come to visit me there, don't forget to pull the nettles off Ned's grave, for I've always kept it tidy, and his poor mother is blind."

" Dear Belle, it shall be done. Is there any other wish that you have concerning that—that—" But Rotta, greatly moved, could not go on.

" No, none ! All the rest must be as you and Robert like, only let it be green like the humbler graves round it, and if Robert would not mind, just my name and ' Jesu, mercy' underneath it ; don't let them put any grand text, nothing but that, or ' Resurgam ;' they put ' Resurgam' over our father's grave."

Rotta gave her word that it should be so ; and when all was over, she wrote to the Vicar. And so they took her back, and one wild March morning, when the dust was swirling down the white roads, and the wind swept the long grasses

of the church-yard, and the grey clouds scudded over the sunless skies, the Vicar went down bare-headed to the gate, and under the old lich-gate they carried her, and laid her close to the dead boy's grave, and under the shadow of the west-door.

And in time the green grass grew over it, and the sun shone down, and the dews and rains of heaven swept sadly over it, and the swallows that built their nests under the church eaves twittered and chirped endlessly about it ; and there, in process of time, was placed a fair marble cross at the head, with but few words graven upon it :—

“ ISABEL FELICIA CLINTON,
Died February 29th, 186—
Aged 25.
JESU, MERCY.”

But the cross had not yet been erected, and the sods were hardly green, when Robert Ord went up to Bryn to wish Rotha good-bye. She was sitting alone in the sunny parlour, and put down her work hastily, as though she suspected his errand.

“ You are going ? you have come to say good-bye, Robert ?” she said, looking in his pale face, anxiously. He had been walking up and down for hours, trying to school himself to calmness, and yet he could hardly meet her eyes as he answered her.

“ Yes, it is good-bye now, and for long enough,

Heaven knows. I suppose it will be four or five years at least before I get a chance of seeing any of you again."

"So long as that? Oh, Robert!"

"Yes, unless——" He stopped, and then completed his sentence recklessly enough—"Unless I am dead and buried, I ought to say."

She sighed heavily, then put her hand in his, as a sister might have done.

"Poor Robert! and going alone too. It seems hard, very hard, and yet it is better than staying behind, and missing it all daily," she finished in the patient, tired voice that was habitual to her now.

His heart smote him for his selfishness. Had she not suffered too? How white her young face had grown; how thin, how anxious-looking; some joy had passed out of her life, some hope that would never be renewed—a painful consciousness that this was so, that she would be very faithful to Gar, seized upon him as he looked at her. How could he ever ask her to come to him and comfort him for the loss of Belle, if this shadow of her dead love were to be for ever between them? Even now, when he had come to wish her good-bye, that look of pain on her face was not for him—it was for Gar—always Gar.

"You will write to me sometimes, Rotha?—you will not forget me?"

"Forget my brother!" answered the girl, reproachfully. Oh, how often she called him that now; how innocently she clung to the conviction that Gar's brother must be hers too—that the name must be as soothing to him as it was to her.

He turned pale at that, even to his lips. Ah, the sods were not green over Belle's grave, and yet the mad infatuation for the living was blending with his sorrow for the dead. Rotha—Rotha Maturin, his sister—impossible! His face was stern enough, but he had schooled himself to patience—he bore even that.

"No; I knew you would not. I ought to know your kindness of heart by this time, Rotha. When I ask you to write to me, remember that I shall be interested in anything, everything that you do."

"It is good of you to say so——" she replied, gratefully. But he interrupted her.

"Never mind how trivial it is—it will be sure to please me. Sometimes you may tell me about my godson, Guy, he has grown very dear to me lately, and about Rube—poor Rube!—and then there is Mary; I don't like to go away and leave her looking as she does."

"She will be better, soon," returned Rotha, hurriedly. "You know we are all going away, and for her sake principally.

"Have you any idea where?"



"Yes; the Vicar and I have been talking it over. It is to be Lucerne, or Zermatt, and the boys, even Arty, are to go with us. You know who is going to take the Vicar's duty for a couple of months?"

"The clergyman who came to poor Belle at the last."

"Yes, Mr. Hillyer; he has resigned his curacy, and is waiting for another. We shall be away quite two months, all June and July, and we are going to Filey for a few weeks first."

"I am glad to hear it, for your sake as well as hers. You look pale and worn, Rotha, almost as though you had been ill yourself."

She smiled at that, as though the subject did not interest her.

"You must take care of yourself, Rotha, for—for all our sakes."

"It is nothing," she replied, in a low voice; "only my nerves are out of order, and I cannot sleep—that is the excuse I am obliged to make to Mary to get her away. She has only agreed to go because she thinks I need a change."

"Poor Mary! she never likes to leave Austin. Ah, Belle would have been just like her. Oh, Rotha! no other woman will ever love me as she did."

Rotha shook her head; she thought so too. And then her eyes fell on the glittering cross which she wore now night and day on the same

finger on which he had placed his mother's old keeper. Some one would have loved her as well, if he had lived as ever Belle had loved Robert—faithful even in death, blessing her with his last dying breath.

"Well, I must go now," exclaimed Robert, hurriedly, as though the words excited his impatience; "there is nothing more to say, and I have all my packing to do."

"Nothing—but God bless you, Robert, and grant you a safe voyage," said Rotha, rising; but now the tears were in her eyes. She was thinking of what had befallen his brother; she was sorry—yes, she was sorry even for him.

"If I do not say anything it is because I cannot, Rotha," he said, pressing her hands hard; "the only thing I dare say is, God love you and bless you for all you have done for me and mine."

"And you, too, dear Robert." And then she put up her face and kissed him, and called him brother once more. And he went.

But that night, an hour before he was to start by the night mail to Liverpool, he left his brother and Mary, and went secretly and alone to the churchyard.

It was quite dark now; the wind was still abroad, and howled drearily round the church, and the rain splashed sullenly on the tombstones, or dripped silently into tiny pools.

But Robert, as he stood bareheaded and with folded arms, heeded it not, for the fierce fever and pain that burnt in his veins.

But once, as he stooped and plucked a few blades of grass from the grave, and hid them in his breast, a sudden overwhelming sense of his loneliness came over him. "Good-bye, Belle," he cried, pressing his lips to the dripping sod, and stretching out his arms over it in the darkness. "Good-bye, my darling. Never woman loved as you would have loved me." Then whispering low, as though he would hide his secret in her very grave, "You know it now, dear, do you not? But you are not angry with me! Oh, Belle, to think that my heart is broken with all this, and that you are not here to comfort me."

Three-quarters of an hour after this Robert had bidden good-bye to Kirkby and Blackscar, and had taken his place by the night mail for Liverpool.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CHILDREN'S HOME.

"I pray you hear my song of a nest,
 For it is not long :—
 You shall never light in a summer quest,
 The bushes among—
 Shall never light on a prouder sitter,
 A fairer nestful, nor ever know
 A softer sound than their tender twitter,
 That wind-like did come and go."

JEAN INGELOW.

"A maid of fullest heart she was,
 Her spirit's lovely flame
 Nor dazzled nor surprised, because
 It always burned the same.
 And in the heavenward path she trod,
 Fair was the wife fore-shown ;
 A Mary in the house of God,
 A Martha in her own."

PATMORE.

THERE are pauses in life, and there are pauses in fiction.

The tide of human circumstance sometimes flows sluggishly and sometimes swiftly. There is a turn, a slight ebbing or flowing; uncovered rocks glisten in the sun; there are coloured sparkles, light frothings; the foam and bubbles burst in the sunlight; snow-white sails gleam on the horizon. The children build up their sand castles, and deck them proudly with seaweed and shells. In the evening the golden tide

silvers and breaks into dark blue shadows—how fair it is, how grand! In the morning the children rise early and go down to the shore to seek their treasures, but, alas! everything is changed: a sullen wind sweeps over the sands, the sea is all grey, the sky hangs low, the waves break into foaming heaps, terrible rolling avalanches of grey snow: the gulls fly inland; there are rumours of wrecks; the fishermen's wives grope wearily to and fro. Do you perceive the inference—grand, pitiful? Ah! so it is with the tide of life; so does it ebb and flow in calm and storm. Now and then there is a break of summer monotony—changeless, unvarying, we might sometimes say almost colourless, the tints are so pallid—all greys or misty blues.

And then comes a long waiting, as the children wait for some ship that never comes after all. And just as, weary of play, and weary of constructing battlements of sand for the waves to demolish, they watch for the dim white sail which flutters for a moment on the horizon, so do their elders sit afar off, listening, sometimes for months, sometimes for years, and waiting for what the tide shall bring them.

But, alas! as the children often go home disappointed, so does many a one go away to his long home, vainly waiting for some hope that has never been verified, some dim imaginary vessel in which they have freighted their all; when at

the turn of the tide they themselves are swept out into the infinite, and other children come to throw the smooth white pebbles into the eddying pools by which they had so often sat.

Such a pause had come to Rotha—a break, when the strange tide of events that for the last ten months had swept her on so hurriedly from one transition to another had at length rolled away, leaving her bruised and battered indeed, but with much soundness in her; when months and even years sped on in a calm, unvarying round of duty not unmixed with pleasure; when Time, that great healer, did its salutary work, and Garton became but a beautiful memory, a link onward and heavenward.

Five years, five whole years, and Rotha Maturin is Rotha Maturin still.

Brief must be the record of these years, during which Rotha strove more and more in her honest woman's endeavour to follow out the Divine precept, “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.” When she took up new work and found it rich with blessings, when “full measure meted out was pressed into her bosom,” and she reaped her woman’s harvest of pure, unselfish joys.

Five years, five long years, and the Vicar looks proudly round at his growing lads, Guy—almost a man now—and Rufus, half a head taller than himself: and the mother’s hair is quite



grey, but her face is sweeter in its chastened gravity than it has ever been before; and Robert is working still, uncomplaining, but sad, in his far-off home; and the swallows fly down on the marble cross, and the daisies grow up among the grass on the dead boy's grave and on Belle's; and in the church, just opposite to where Rotha sits, is a noble painted window, with the Man of Sorrows bearing His cross along the bitter way; and under it is written:—

“ In memory of
G A R T O N O R D,
Who died December 29th, 186—,
Aged Twenty-three.
IN HOC SPERO.”

It was soon after the anniversary of his death that something very unexpected befell Rotha. George Effingham made her an offer.

He had come up very boldly to Bryn to prefer his request, and bore himself in a way sufficiently manly; but Rotha shrank back, feeling herself wounded, she hardly knew why.

“ I never gave you any encouragement—any right to speak to me like this, Mr. Effingham,” she said, turning pale and trembling at this strange story of love. Her tone was repellent, almost indignant.

“ I never said that you did,” returned George, sullenly; “ but when a man loves a girl I think he has a right to tell her so.”

Poor George Effingham! He had a heart somewhere, in spite of his shallowness, and to do him justice he was smitten by the woman as well as the heiress. Rotha relented at the sight of his crestfallen looks: he had not much to say for himself, but he was tolerably honest, and then there were tears of positive disappointment in the poor fellow's eyes. Her next words were more gentle.

"Perhaps I ought to thank you, Mr. Effingham. Many girls would feel themselves honoured by what you have told me; if I have been impatient or ungrateful you must forgive me. It is not my fault that I cannot forget him," continued the girl, bursting into tears. "I don't think that I shall ever be able to listen to any one after Gar."

But as he turned to go, she held out her hand to him with a little contrition for her hardness.

"You must not be hurt or angry, Mr. Effingham, because I cannot forget my trouble. I don't want to be any one's wife now that poor Gar is gone. I don't mean to marry—never—never," cried the girl, with a flush. "But I hope I shall be your friend always," smiling in the face of the discomfited young man. "There, go, dear Mr. Effingham, and God bless you!"

Rotha kept her word, for Nettie did not marry the widower, after all; but fifteen months

afterwards she married George Effingham, and made him the best little wife possible. George told his wife everything, like a man. But I do not think he was prepared for the confidence she gave him in return ; for he found that Nettie had loved Gar really and truly, and that many of her reckless and fantastic ways had grown out of her disappointment.

But she never told Rotha, though Rotha guessed it ; but they all three became excellent friends. Nettie gave up fifteen out of her three-and-twenty bosom friends when she married, and consoled herself instead with her babies. But if you asked who was the most notable housekeeper and the most domesticated little matron in the whole of Blackscar, they would tell you that it was George Effingham's wife, *née* Eliza-Ann Underwood.

This was the first little episode that disturbed Rotha's monotony ; but by-and-by there was another, when a great work grew out of a little speech of the Vicar's.

Rotha was still insisting on being Lady Bountiful at the Vicarage ; but at last the Vicar—that most enduring of men—became restive, and told the little Sister that it would not do at all ; on which occasion he addressed her in the following words :—

“ It wont do, Rotha, and so I tell you. And now I am quite determined that we shall come

to an understanding with one another, for this sort of thing must not go on."

"What sort of thing, Mr. Ord?"

"Now, Rotha, I can tell by that quiet curl of the lip that you are going to be troublesome; but I beg to inform you that the big brother is quite serious."

"So am I—painfully so, I assure you. Now, Mr. Ord, what sort of thing?"

"Do you want me to publish a list of your iniquities? You are growing too barefaced a sinner for me to deal with. Never mind. I will serve you up a resumé, hot and strong. First, there was taking Mary away to Filey—a piece of generous forethought that prevented a relapse after Belle's death. I owe you one for that, little Sister. Then there were the travelling expenses to Zermatt, and maintaining an establishment there for two months, when Mary and the boys and Reuben were your visitors."

"And you would not be. Oh, Mr. Ord, do you think I have ever forgiven you that?"

"Forgiven, forsooth! because I had a little bit of manly independence left. I like that! But that was nothing to my feelings when I got home. The Vicarage papered and painted from garret to basement—my servants bribed and made accessories to the plot—new carpets and curtains all over the house—fresh chintz in the dining-room—a new easy-chair in the mother's

room—a new-fangled writing-table, and a lot of oaken rubbish in the study! When I think of it now," finished the Vicar, passing his hand over his face to conceal his smile, "I almost wonder that I can have anything to do with such a generous criminal."

"Now, Mr. Ord, we have heard this almost twenty times. You forget that I heard you tell Nettie, the other day, that it did your heart good to see dear Mary's face light up at the sight of her renovated house. I am sure you never liked any writing-table so well as this, Mr. Ord."

"Bless her!" very nearly said the Vicar, but he checked himself in time, and went on sternly with the list.

"I don't think perhaps I ought to mention the marble cross, and the memorial window in the same category?"

"No—oh, no," faltered Rotha, with quivering lip, and the Vicar, clearing his throat several times, went on in the same serio-comic manner.

"But I don't think that a clergyman's wife ought to dress as Mary does. I don't understand it myself, of course," continued the Vicar, somewhat puzzled; "and except that her dresses are black and shiny, I don't know much about it. But I don't think Mrs. Stephen Knowles ought to say as she does, that Mrs. Ord wears the most expensive stuffs that are to be got. I heard her

say so myself the other day." But to his surprise, Rotha, after vainly trying to answer him in the same vein, suddenly burst into tears.

"Nay, my dear child, I am only in jest. What is this?"

"I did not mean—I tried not. But, Mr. Ord, you must let me do this for Mary; you don't know how I love to do it, and I never had a sister. And now she is everything to me, and I want to feel that I am a sister to her in Belle's place."

"Dear Rotha, you are a better sister to her than ever Belle has been."

"No—no—don't say so; almost her last words were for Mary; and if it were true, she would never think so."

"My faithful-hearted Mary, no — nothing could ever shake her belief in Belle's goodness and affection to herself. Dear Rotha, we are ending our conversation rather sadly. Don't fear for one moment that I shall ever call you to account for what you do for her. Be sisters in heart and deed if you will, but, Rotha, you have done enough for us now—let it rest here."

Rotha was silent for a moment, and then she said, very gravely, "Do you really wish it, Mr. Ord?"

"Yes," he returned, without hesitation; "my circumstances are better now, since the burden of poor Belle's maintenance is withdrawn,

and I have no longer to help Robert in supporting Gar. Robert is quite rich too, and he talked in his last letter of having his godson sent out to him."

"No, no," interrupted Rotha, hastily; "let it be Rufus—Rufe has no taste for learning, and Guy has. I will accede to all your conditions, Mr. Ord, if you will only let me provide for Guy."

The Vicar shook his head doubtfully, but Rotha laid her hand on his arm persuasively, and went on—

"He is more than sixteen now, and is getting a great fellow—too big to be idle, and be a burden to his father. In another year or two my son"—Rotha always called Reuben her adopted son—"is going to Oxford. I am glad and thankful the dear boy is anxious to be a clergyman. Let Guy, Robert's godson, go with him; and let me feel," whispered Rotha, laying her cheek against the kind hand, "as though this were my monument to Gar; and that the two boys he loved so fondly may become faithful priests, as he would have been if he had been spared." And, deeply touched, the Vicar, after a little hesitation granted her request for his eldest-born.

It was some words of his dropped shortly afterwards, that gave Rotha the idea which she was so ready to carry out.

She was complaining to him that in spite of

her lavish gifts, her money seemed to accumulate, rather than otherwise.

"We want so little, Meg and I, and we prefer to live simply," added Rotha. "And there seems so little chance of its finding its way, after all into Robert's hands, or his children's either; for I fancy after what has happened that he will not marry any more than I shall."

"And it is my opinion that both will marry. But all in good time," prophesied the Vicar, who was the only one who had a glimmering of Robert's secret.

Rotha looked surprised and a little hurt, for it was only six months since she had refused George Effingham; and Mary, her sole confidante, knew she had refused him, and Mary told everything to her husband. After such a proof of faithfulness to Garton's memory, she scarcely liked to be told that it was possible, nay, very probable, that she would marry after all; and Robert, too, who had cared for one woman for five years.

The Vicar saw the girl's hot flush, but he took no notice. His knowledge of the world told him that Rotha would think very differently presently "If I were you, I would seek some interest or object in which you might invest your surplus money. I don't know whether you have ever thought of such a thing, or whether it would exactly suit your views, but the surgeon of the



Cottage Hospital at Thornborough told me that he wished it were possible to have a small branch establishment at Blackscar, or even Kirkby, that some of the convalescent children might have a month or two of pure sea air before returning to the filthy alleys and dens where they lived."

Rotha almost clapped her hands when she heard the Vicar's words. "The very thing!" she exclaimed; "the very thing that Meg has been longing for—work among children, and I think," she added, with a quaint sadness, "that it will just suit the little Sister too."

And so it came about that the "Children's Home," as it was called, was established in Kirkby.

Rotha and Meg thought over the matter deeply before they matured their plans and laid them before the Vicar. Meg was even more enthusiastic than Rotha, although Rotha threw herself heart and soul into the undertaking.

By the Vicar's advice it was only begun on a small scale at first. Two or three of the white-washed cottages adjoining the Vicarage were taken, and thrown into one, and furnished in the simplest manner. A young woman, whose sad history had brought her under Rotha's notice, was to be the nurse in charge, and an orphan, who had been trained under Mrs. Ord's own eye, would be sufficient for the cooking and cleaning. The "Little Sister," as she now began to style her-

self, was to be head matron and housekeeper, with Meg under her.

Perhaps the happiest hours that Rotha had ever spent since Garton's death were in fitting up and arranging her Children's Home. Mary found her often singing over her work as she sewed carpets or stitched blinds—nothing seemed to come amiss to her nimble fingers. The boys—Reuben and Guy especially—her two devoted knights, as the Vicar dubbed them, worked like horses in their leisure hours. The three gardens had of course been thrown into one, and made a tolerably large enclosure. Guy and Reuben laid down the new grass sods, and planted the privet-hedge to shut out the palings; while Laurie and even Arty were never weary of rolling the fresh gravel. And Rufus, who was no mean carpenter, put up shelves, fitted up the cupboards with pegs, knocked his head valiantly against the low cottage ceiling in hanging the clean dimity curtains, and was the most good-natured aide-de-camp to the two women that could be found.

His last duty was to put up the huge board over the entrance, on which Reuben had been bestowing infinite care, and paint on it "The Children's Home." It was put up at the High Street entrance, facing the church, and deeply affected Rotha when she went down to the bottom of the garden with the boys to read it.

"How big it is!—I can read it from here!"



said Arty, contemplating it with feelings of awe.

"It really looks like a beginning, Meg," whispered Rotha; and Meg, always chary of words, dropped her eye-glass with a satisfied nod.

The next day was a perfect fête to the young workers, for the Vicar and his wife and the new curate, Mr. Tregarthen, a distant relation of Sir Edgar's, were to come on a tour of inspection; and Nettie and Aunt Eliza were to be of the party; and in the afternoon the first patient, a crippled boy afflicted with abscesses, was to come over from Thornborough.

Rotha had come very early in the morning; but early as it was, Rufus and Laurie had rolled the paths freshly, and watered the grass, and had done everything, and almost more than possibly could be done, while Reuben was nailing up the last beautiful illuminated text that Rotha had finished late last night, just fronting the entrance—"Suffer the little children to come unto Me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven." Every room and nearly every cot was furnished with the same illuminated texts, all appropriate to the sick and suffering little ones who were to be received under that roof.

The visitors arrived punctually at the appointed hour, and the boys formed already a sort of guard of honour to receive them; but neither

the Vicar nor Mary could forbear a smile when they saw the little Sister. Rotha and Meg had arranged that, for convenience sake as well as decorum, they would wear a simple uniform of grey during their working hours at the Home; and Rotha wore a little cap over her bright hair, which suited her infinitely better than it did Meg; for, if possible, Mrs. Carruthers looked more gauche than usual in the homely grey dress and linen collar and cuffs that looked so natty on Rotha, who came bustling up with her keys dangling from her trim waistband to receive her friends.

"Peace be to this house!" said the Vicar, taking off his broad-brimmed hat. I will not repeat the whole of that solemn, beautiful blessing, which thrilled those who heard it. And then stepping over the threshold, he spoke a few forcible words on that text—"I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me. I was sick, and ye visited me;" and then, kneeling down, he invoked a blessing on the house and the work that was to be that day undertaken for the glory of God, and for the relief of His suffering children. "And oh," prayed the Vicar, "may He who took the little ones in His gracious arms and blessed them, enter with us this day, and stretch out His hands in blessing over this house! May He strengthen the heart and hands of this ministering woman,

that it may be said of her and of all who follow her in this work, in that day of days, ‘ She hath done what she could ! ’ ”

There was a brief silence, hushed and full of feeling. “ And now,” said the Vicar, rising, and giving his hand to Rotha, “ we are ready to follow the little Sister, and to see and admire all that is to be seen. And first, what room are we in ? ”

“ They are all written up over the doors,” returned Rotha, in a low voice ; for she was somewhat overcome by the solemnity of the Vicar’s address.

“ This is called ‘ The Mother’s Room,’ ” interrupted Rube, eagerly, who had kept as near to his adopted mother as possible.

“ I want to feel as though I am their mother,” returned Rotha, bashfully, “ and as though they were all my children for the time being. It will help me to be more patient and loving with them than I might otherwise be. This is where I shall write, and keep my accounts, and receive visitors, and where Meg will sit too. I shall always be here from ten to one on every day in the week, and Meg from two to five in the afternoon. One or other of us will always be here.”

“ I see you mean to work it thoroughly,” returned the Vicar, smiling. “ A very good arrangement, don’t you think so, Tregarthen ? ” And then he looked round approvingly on the snug

cottage parlour, with its cool summer matting and white curtains, and the fresh flowers on the little round table, and a beautiful engraving of "Christ Blessing Little Children" over the mantelpiece. The illumination for this room was Rotha's favourite one, that we have already quoted—"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might." And on the table, as though willing to put the precept into practice, was a visitors' book, in which the Vicar wrote the first entry, and a newly-lined account-book, with a formidable array of pens bristling in a very large inkstand.

From this room they proceeded to the kitchen, where they were received by the smiling Orphan clad in a new print dress of alarming stiffness, over which she wore a snow-white bib-apron. "Come, show your cupboards, Emma," said the Vicar. And the girl, curtseying and rosy with pleasure, showed the shelves, with their rows of shining pewter and china mugs; while Caroline, a pleasing-looking young woman, slightly marked with the small-pox, led them into the storeroom, where Rotha's linen-press was, and where she was to keep her stores of groceries and jams, and the simple medicines and salves that they were likely to need.

Leading out of this was the long low room where the children were to dine, or have their lessons, and where they could also play on



rainy days. There was no furniture but one long table, and a few chairs and stools ; but a large picture of the Infant Saviour, and several beautiful prints, all sacred subjects, hung on the walls ; and Mary noticed there were flowers tastefully arranged in this room, while a canary sang shrilly in a green cage, and a fine tabby cat and kittens reposed in a cushioned basket.

"Carrying out your theories, Rotha?" said her friend, with a smile.

"Yes," returned Rotha, softly. "I cannot imagine children without pets and flowers ; to me it seems a part of their education. My children will delight in those kittens. If you open those cupboards, Nettie, you will find them full of picture-books and toys. You see the school-books are all bound neatly for use."

"I don't believe you have forgotten a single thing," cried Nettie, with a sigh, half admiring, half envious. "Just look at those little work-boxes for the girls, Mr. Tregarthen, and the patterns of wool-work for the boys. Why, Rotha, you could have done nothing else for months."

"You forget I have had Meg to help me ; that is Meg's department," returned Rotha, blushing ; and then they went up to the dormitories. There were only four neat little rooms, with three or four beds or cots apiece, all fitted up with the same pretty summer matting, and with

white dimity curtains, blowing in the fresh sea breeze ; over every bed was a picture, and a text underneath ; and a white plaster angel on a bracket in every room, seemed to keep guard over the little sufferers.

"Oh, Austin, could it be better ?" whispered Mary, with tears in her eyes. "If only our darling Belle had been here to see it."

"She sees it now, perhaps," he returned ; "and our Gar too." And Rotha, catching the words, looked out on the sunny waves, and thought how he would have liked it.

Rotha was greatly tired by all the excitement ; she had worked early and late too, and when all her visitors except Reuben had departed, she merely stayed to welcome her little patient—a perfect "Tiny Tim" of a child, rejoicing in the extraordinary name of "Shirtle Pearl;" and leaving Meg to undress him, and lay him in his little cot, she went slowly home, leaving Reuben to have tea at the Vicarage with Guy, who was now his great chum.

When she got home she found a letter awaiting her from Robert, for they had kept up a steady correspondence now for more than two years. Robert wrote extremely well, and one of his long letters was always a treat to Rotha. She had just written him a full account of her plans for her Children's Home, and doubtless this was in answer ; so asking Prue to bring her a

cup of tea in her own room, she sat herself down by the open window to enjoy that and her letter together.

But the tea cooled, and Rotha's cheek grew white before she had read many lines; but long before she had finished it her face was scarlet and burning, and as it dropped from her hands she put her head down on the window-sill, and cried long and bitterly. But all she said was, "Poor Robert! poor Robert!" And then, "Oh, Gar, whatever would you say? Oh, Gar, never—never!" and kissed the gold keeper that guarded the glittering cross.

And yet it was more than two years since she had lost him—and it had been but a nine days' wonder after all—and Robert had written a letter such as few women could have resisted, and had shown her his heart with such a depth of passionate love in it that she might well weep and wring her hands, knowing that it was in vain.

What it had cost him to write it! and yet every line was tinged with hopelessness akin to despair; it was as though he knew that he tried his fate in vain, and still could not resist the attempt.

"What you will say, or what you will think, I dare not pause to ask myself, or I should never send this; but something within me forces me to speak, and demands to be heard. If I cannot

wring an answer from you now, perhaps the coming years may do something for me; not that I can afford to wait, God knows, for I am growing old and grey before my time with all this misery. But because I love you so, Rotha, with every fibre of my being, with every thought of my heart, as I have never—dear Belle! sweet saint, you know it now—loved or could love any other woman."

Well may she tremble, and cover up her face with her hands, and cry out that it must be a mistake—Robert! Gar's brother!—and then calm herself with saying the dear name over and over again. Does she feel now, as she must have done, that Gar was but a boy compared to this man? She reads on, page after page. Ah, he does not spare himself. She can hardly bear to read the generous self-accusing—the many acts of his past cruelty which he brings back to her recollection; it was as though he strove to humiliate himself even in her sight. Never, he tells her, has he forgiven himself, never is her face, so sweet and so reproachful, absent from his mind for one moment; and then he speaks of the long atonement, of the dreary evenings when he and his remorse are brought face to face, and how little by little he feels himself purified by suffering and more worthy to address her.

"Not that my pride would even now tell you



"this," he finished, "if I did not know that I might any day command an independent position in England. But, Rotha, unless I grow weak, which I may, Heaven knows, seeing to what I have come, I have almost sworn that nothing but you can ever recall me; but speak that word, Rotha, and I come.

"Yours, through and through, however you may scorn my love—ROBERT ORD."

Ah, well may she make herself nearly ill with weeping, and creep to her bed that her faithful Meg may not guess the cause of her grief. Not for days—days during which her white weary looks move the Vicar and his wife to compassion, not unmixed with curiosity—does she write her answer. "She is in trouble," she tells them; but begs them earnestly not to ask her why, and then goes and sits among her children till her sweet face grows calm and serene again. But that is not till she has written to him, not till she has penned a few lines with many tears, in which she tells him that "she loves him dearly, dearly; that she will pray for him, and think of him day and night, but that she cannot forget Gar. No, she cannot, she cannot! And then bids God bless him for his faithful friend and sister—ROTHA."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BROKEN CLAUSE.

“ Come, lest this heart should, cold and cast away,
 Die ere the guest adored she entertain ;
 Lest eyes which never saw Thine earthly day,
 Should miss thy heavenly reign.

“ Come weary-eyed from seeking in the night
 Thy wanderers strayed upon the pathless wold,
 Who wounded, dying, cry to Thee for light,
 And cannot find their fold.”

JEAN INGELOW.

BUT another episode occurred shortly which disturbed Rotha not a little, and which for a short time broke up the tranquility of Bryn.

It was about four or five months after the Children’s Home had been established. So far the trial had been a success ; nine children had been received as patients, and the little Sister was now at work in earnest.

Every one who saw it—and visitors were numerous during the first few weeks—said that the Home was admirably managed, as indeed it was.

Rotha was there every morning, and never left till Meg took her place. Rotha’s part was to give out stores, write orders for the tradesmen,

keep the accounts, and receive visitors. She also looked after Caroline and saw that the dormitories were kept tidy and ventilated.

Meg's duties were different, she presided over the children's meals, gave short lessons to those who were well enough to receive them, taught the little girls work, and sang hymns with them, and when the weather was fine took them down to the shore, where she might be seen any lovely afternoon among the sandhills with a crippled baby in her arms, pushing Shirtle Pearl's perambulator before her, and surrounded by a crew of sickly or limping little ones. This was Meg's own work, and she dearly loved it.

Of course Rotha's time was greatly taken up, and an afternoon or an evening at the Vicarage became a rare treat ; in general it was understood that Meg and she were to have their evenings free, and to spend them together in the old way, but often Meg stopped till the little ones were safely tucked up in their dormitories, and Shirtle had left off moaning himself to sleep. Meg used to sing the Evening Hymn with the children, and then come out through the sweet summer air to meet Rotha going to or from church. Rotha used to smile, but she never reproached Meg for her delay. She knew that Meg began to centre all her happiness within those cottage walls. The children loved Meg almost more than they did Rotha. She told them quaint stories when they

sat among the sandhills, and she could carry two or three together in her strong arms when they were tired. When the children were sick they always asked Meg to come and sing to them. Meg could sing them "Ye faire one with ye goldene locks," as well as she could "The Three Kings," and the Manger songs. Rotha, returning for her afternoon, would peep in sometimes, into the refectory as it was called, and find Meg sitting on the floor with the children swarming round her, telling the story of "Henny Penny," or "Goody Two Shoes," or the "Little Tiny, Tiny Woman :" —kittens and children and Meg, and sometimes Rotha's little grey skye Fidgets, all in a chaotic mass together. The youngest child there, a mere baby, would clap her hands and say "Meg," if asked whom she loved, though she always finished with, "Meg, and little Mother too ; and Meg loves Annie."

It would have been no wonder if Rotha grew absorbed in her sweet work ; but she did not forget the duties that her position entailed, and though she told all her friends frankly that she had no time for either paying or receiving mere calls of ceremony, she still accepted invitations for a quiet evening, and now and then dispensed "hospitality without grudging," throwing open her pretty rooms, and making all her friends heartily welcome.

These evenings were much sought after, for



Rotha was an admirable hostess under Mrs. Ord's chaperonage, and among her most frequent visitors were Lady Tregarthen and Mr. Ramsay, who were both liberal subscribers to the Home.

Rotha had taken the Vicar's advice, and received all voluntary donations and subscriptions, and after the first year it was found necessary to form a ladies' committee, when Rotha was unanimously elected as Secretary and Treasurer, and in a little while another cottage was added, and then another, as the applications became more numerous, until at last Rotha acceded to Mr. Ramsay's generous proposition to unite with her in building new and more spacious premises ; and when this was done, which was not for some years after this story closes, Meg was elected as resident Lady-Superintendent, and spent the last years of a long and useful life among the children whom she so dearly loved.

One cloudy afternoon late in October, Meg had occasion to go into Blackscar on some business connected with the Home. Rotha remaining on duty during her absence, was sitting writing in "the Mother's room," with baby Annie fast asleep at her feet, when there was a quick light tap at the door, and the Vicar entered.

"I thought Mrs. Carruthers was here, Rotha," he said, rather anxiously. "Is she up at Bryn, then?"

"No, she has just gone into Blackscar, and I

don't expect her back till nearly five. Why! did you want her?" she asked, struck by something grave in the Vicar's tone.

In reply he went to the door and shut it carefully, and then taking a seat, stirred the fire thoughtfully, and warmed his hands over it, for the afternoons were growing decidedly chilly.

"Do you think you could find her?" he asked, after a pause, during which Rotha's curiosity had been strongly roused by his unusual gravity.

"Find her! well I am not quite sure that I could; she has gone to the Infirmary, and to the bank, and to several shops. Why! is anything the matter, Mr. Ord?"

"There is no time to be lost," continued the Vicar, musingly, and rubbing his hands slowly over each other. "The Rector said so, and I suppose he knew. Rotha, who do you think is lying ill, apparently dying, only two or three miles from here?"

Rotha looked at him earnestly for a moment, and then the truth flashed on her.

"Not Jack, Mr. Ord! You don't mean Jack Carruthers, poor Meg's husband?" and the Vicar nodded.

"I have just come from the Rector's, Rotha. I hurried on here thinking I could find her before I took the train to Thornborough. You know I have to preach a charity sermon at St. Luke's?"

"Well!" exclaimed Rotha, breathlessly.

"Well, I must tell you what he said. But you must find Mrs. Carruthers, for there is no time to be lost. Mr. Hodgson sent for me directly he found out the truth.

"Early this morning Mr. Hodgson was sent for by the landlady of 'The Pig and Whistle,' a low little public-house on the Leatham road, just before you turn off by the path that leads to the Leatham woods. I daresay you have often passed it, there is an old stone drinking trough placed under a very fine elm tree, with a small green before it, always full of geese."

"Yes, yes!" returned Rotha, eagerly; "I went in once with Meg to ask my way."

"Well, the landlady is a very tidy body, and she told Mr. Hodgson when he got there that she was greatly troubled about a poor man who had come in for a night's lodging about ten days ago, and had laid there ever since, growing from bad to worse, till at last the doctor said that he had not many hours to live, and she thought she had better fetch a clergyman to him. She described him when he came in as very emaciated and miserable looking, almost as though he had been half-starved, with a driven hunted look in his eyes, as though he was not quite in his right mind; and she described to the Rector, his moaning and restless picking at the clothes, as a sign that the end was not far off."

"Oh, my poor Meg!" sighed Rotha; but the Vicar went on.

"I must tell you exactly what happened, and then leave it in your hands. Mr. Hodgson went up, of course, and found the poor creature just as she described; and a more forlorn object the Rector said he had never seen. "He had evidently once been a fine-looking man," the Rector said; "but a more hollow, wasted face he had never seen, rendered more intensely deathlike by the ragged black whiskers and beard, and eyes unnaturally large. He seemed pleased to see Mr. Hodgson, and told him scraps of his history as well as he could. He had been a sheep-farmer in Australia, and had afterwards gone to the diggings. Had then lost all, and worked his way home again; and in some drunken fray had broken a bloodvessel, and had lain in a hospital for months at the point of death. He gave his name as Jack Carruthers, and told Mr. Hodgson that he had a wife living, he supposed near London; that he had made some attempts to find her, but had never succeeded. But his description of her to Mr. Hodgson so exactly resembled our Mrs. Carruthers, whom he had met several times at my house, that, without saying anything to the poor fellow, he brought back a scrap of his hand-writing with him and sent for me at once.

"There can be no doubt that it is her hus-

band, I suppose," interrupted Rotha at this point.

"None, I think; but of course she will recognise his handwriting. Now, Rotha, I can do nothing more in the business myself, and I must leave it, as I said before, in your hands. Will you undertake to find Mrs. Carruthers for me, for I am afraid, from the Rector's account, that this is the poor fellow's last night on earth? Mr. Hodgson has promised to go again to-morrow in case he should be alive. But he could make very little impression on him. All the time he was praying he was moaning out to 'Madge'—I suppose that was his wife—to come to him."

"I will go at once," returned Rotha, lifting up the sleeping child in her arms:

"And I will wait and go with you as far as the station," observed the Vicar. And in another five minutes Rotha and he had left the house together.

The bank was already closed; but Rotha went to the Infirmary and to several of the principal shops before she found Meg in the chemist's dark little back parlour, waiting till sundry prescriptions had been made up. Rotha made some excuse to the druggist, and took her out; and then, linking her arm in hers, led the way down one of the side streets which led to old Blackscar church, and on to the Leatham Road.

It was a cloudy afternoon, and already it was growing dusk ; and one or two drops, forerunners of a wet evening, splashed down on Rotha's mantle.

"Meg darling, can you bear a little suspense ? will you promise me not to be too much shocked at what I am going to tell you ?" began Rotha very tenderly, all the more as she felt the sudden close grip of her arm.

"Something is the matter ! You have heard of Jack ! He is dead !" exclaimed Meg, in a wild, pitiful sort of way as she caught sight of Rotha's grave face.

"No ; not so bad as that. Meg dear, look at this writing ; is it his ?" She need not have asked when she saw Meg kissing it and crying over it.

"Oh, my darling Jack ! my own Jack's handwriting ! Oh, Rotha, for pity's sake tell me where you have got it ? Is he alive ? Can I go to him ?

"We are going to him ; and I trust to Heaven that we may find him alive. But he is very ill, Meg, desperately so ; dying, they say." And then, as they hurried on regardless of the fast patterning drops, she told Meg all that she had heard from the Vicar, and begged her to prepare herself and to be calm for Jack's sake as well as her own, for he was very ill, so very ill ; and so on.

Meg made no answer but to wring her hands and walk on faster; once she broke out into bitter weeping when she heard he had asked for "Madge."

"He never called me anything but that when he was in a good humour," she said. "Oh, Jack, Jack, just to hear you call me that once more," and then quickened her pace till Rotha could hardly keep up with her. It was a wet evening and still early, and there were few loungers round the door of the Pig and Whistle; and they took very little notice of the two ladies, who, they supposed, wished to take shelter from the approaching storm.

"It is going to be a dirty night, ladies," said one who looked like the ostler.

Rotha said, "Yes, a very unpleasant evening," and pushed past into the little dark entry, where a bright glow shone from the bar, in which a rosy-faced landlady was sitting alone at a little round table drinking tea.

Even under these painful circumstances Rotha noticed how cosy it looked, and what a bright fire it was, before the landlady started up at the sight of the two ladies, and came bustling up.

"You have a Mr. Carruthers here," began Rotha with difficulty, and in an instant a shade came over the woman's pleasant face.

"Dear, dear; yes, the poor creature! The

Rector has sent you, has he?" glancing curiously at Rotha's dress and Meg's agitated face.

Rotha said "Yes" impatiently, and begged that they might be shown up at once; but Meg put her hurriedly aside.

"I am his wife, good woman—his wife—do you hear? For pity's sake take me to him at once."

"Dear sakes alive," muttered the rosy landlady; "who would have thought his wife was here, poor creature? The Madge no doubt he's calling after. Bet's with him now. Bet's a famous nurse, and was with him all last night. Bet's nursed two brothers and a sister, and saw a winding sheet in the candle last night," gasped out the garrulous landlady as she toiled before them up the steep, crooked staircase. "One landing more. He asked for our worst room, having little money; and he's got it, sure enough. Stoop your heads as you go in, ladies, for the ceiling is rarely low; and there is a deep step, you might break your necks, leading down to the room."

"Hush, he's partly asleep," said Bet, a strong-featured, red-armed wench, coming forward. "It's been Madge, Madge, off and on all the afternoon till I'm that moidered I'm fit to craze."

"It is the gentleman's wife, Bet," said the landlady, wiping her eyes on her apron as Meg, with a sort of sob kneels down beside the narrow truckle



bed ; and Rotha, half awed, half dizzy, looks round the comfortless garret with its lean-to roof, and its carpetless floor, and the creaking bedstead with the blue-striped counterpane. Bet puts her arms akimbo and says, "Lor heart's alive, missis, and to think of that!" and breaks into an hysterical chuckle. The rain pours down against the crazy window, the sign flaps madly outside, the fire splutters up with a faint gurgle, and the candle gutters low in the socket. Meg, kneeling with her arms extended over the bed, kisses a pale hand lying motionless on the coverlet ; and the uneasy sleeper stirs and moans restlessly "Madge, Madge!"

"Hear him?" says Bet ; "he says nought else."

Meg, turning her white face to Rotha, repeats softly, "Hear him?" And whispers to herself, "Thank God!"

Rotha clears the room after that, and sets the guttering candle aside and lights another ; and then, replenishing the tiny fire, closes the door and comes again to the bed.

"He looks very ill, Meg," she whispers. Meg, laying the skeleton hand against her cheek, points to the wasted, slender arm, and shakes her head.

"Not long for this world, are you, Jack? Oh, Jack! Jack!" she repeats in a heart-rending voice, "wont you wake up once more and speak to your wife—your wife, Jack?" And as

though the suppressed agony of her tones had power to rouse him, he opened his eyes wildly, and rolled them from side to side.

"Whose voice was that?" he muttered, hoarsely; "so like hers when the dead boy was carried out. Don't haunt me, Madge; don't haunt me!"

"Oh, Jack! your own Madge—never, never!"

The restless picking of the clothes recommenced.

"Who said it was my fault, and that she might have died too?" he raved more loudly. "Somebody pointed out the black bruise on her neck. Who struck her? Not I? 'Don't strike me, Jack, when I love you so,' she said, a curse on her white reproachful face. No, Madge, I did not mean that. Come here, my girl! The boy died, and the mother too, but I did not murder them. All the legions of hell are trying to put it on me. But I wont say I did it; I wont!" and the voice fell into indistinct muttering.

"Jack! don't you know me, dear Jack?"

"Know you—too well," he muttered. "You are Madge Browning—tall Madge Browning—old miser Browning's daughter—ugly as sin. Who said that? Nonsense. I've brought you some carnations. Dark reds for Madge's faded colours. Don't wear white, it does not suit you. Say it aloud. Louder still. I can't hear you

love, honour, and cherish. Whom? Browning's daughter? Ah, ah! No. Nonsense. Kiss me, Madge. I'm a drunken brute, but I never meant to hurt you."

"He does not know me. Oh, Jack! one word, only one word."

"Hush! she is playing her music—grand, grand! The Dead March in Saul. No, not that. Do you hear? Ah! terrible, terrible!" Again the indistinct mutterings, again he dozed, then woke more conscious as Meg was putting something to his lips.

"Who is this? not Madge—Madge herself?"

"Yes, your own Madge, dear; your faithful, loving wife. Drink some more, darling Jack."

The hollow eyes stared over the rim of the china vessel, and then he pushed it aside.

"No, more! I can't swallow! Is it really you, Madge, and not a dream?"

"Really and truly. Thank God you know me at last!"

"I don't know you," he repeated, half frightened. "My Madge had no grey hair, and her face was not white like yours."

"That was seven years ago, Jack."

"Seven years ago? ay; that's a long time surely." He seemed wandering again, but she roused him.

"Say something to me before you go to sleep, Jack," she said, supporting the poor

dying head on her arm. "Say God bless you, Madge, once—only once!"

"God bless you, Madge! that is a prayer, isn't it? I haven't said my prayers for seven years; never I think since I was a child." He looked up in her face as though a glimmering of the terrible truth reached him even in his semi-consciousness. "I haven't said my prayers, and I am going to die."

"Say them now. Oh, Jack! fold your hands in mine, and say one prayer for mercy." He shook his head feebly.

"I don't know any. Teach me, Madge." And he let her hold his hands, and tried to say the words after her.

"'I will arise and go to my Father. To my Father.' What next, Madge? 'And will say unto Him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before—before——'" The broken clause was never finished, for he dropped his face, muttering still, upon her bosom. Two hours afterwards he slept away unconscious still, and Meg fell weeping upon Rotha's neck, and suffered her to lead her away from the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

FIVE YEARS AFTERWARDS.

" Her letters too,
 Though far between, and coming fitfully,
 Like broken music, written as she found
 Or made occasion, being strictly watch'd,
 Charm'd him through every labyrinth till he saw
 An end, a hope, a light breaking upon him."

TENNYSON.

" Yes it was love, if thoughts of tenderness
 Tried in temptation, strengthen'd by distress,
 Unmov'd by absence, firm in every clime,
 And yet, oh, more than all ! untired by time."

BYRON.

Two more years passed on, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest, since Meg closed the eyes of her poor Prodigal, and took up the fresh burthen of her grief and her widowhood together.

At first the shock seemed to have stunned her, and then she wept till her poor half-blind eyes could weep no more. It was sad to witness that terrible waste of love and sorrow ; she grew worn and grey—thin almost to a shadow ; a sick loathing of all her duties came upon her ; she shrank even from her children, and for a little while cared to do nothing but to sit

by Jack's grave, and to brood silently over her trouble. But the dark hour passed and the pale face grew placid again under the widow's cap ; and strangers as they lingered in the churchyard in the summer evenings, often paused to hear the wonderful, rich pealing of the organ, and stealing into the empty church in the twilight, saw Meg sitting alone with upturned face in the moonlight, and playing fragments of strange requiem masses. Was it Jack's requiem she was playing ? Hark ! it breaks into a low monotonous chant. The moonbeams play on the chancel pavement. The perfume of fresh lilies, dim white globes with golden hearts, bound up with scented sheaves, pervade the air ; a voice tender, tremulous, breaks into deep, rich tones—"I will arise, and go to my Father——"

Ah ! Jack's dying prayer. The broken sentence unfinished and suggestive. The strangers steal away. Meg comes out, a black shadowy figure, and pauses for a moment by a white tombstone, whereon is the name "Jack Carruthers," and underneath it that noble clause from the Creed, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

"Where have you been to-night, dear Meg ?" And Meg, with the solemn light still shining in her eyes, would often answer—

"Half way to Paradise and back. And the music seemed like angels' wings, and carried me

away, till the chords jarred. And then I went to Jack's grave, and wished him good night." And Meg would turn the wedding-ring round and round on her thin finger with a happy smile. And Rotha would know that that strange communion had strengthened and refreshed her, and that for many a day Meg would be bright, almost joyous.

But the anniversary of Jack's death had come round twice, and it was now more than five years since Robert had come up to Bryn to wish Rotha good-bye. More than five years, for then the rough March winds had been blowing, and now the soft May breezes swept refreshingly over the blue summer sea, and the primroses and the cowslips had long ago made golden hollows in the Burnley glens and Leatham woods, and the children went out in the fields to make daisy-chains, and to hunt in the hedges for briar roses, and bunches of pink and white May blossoms. And Meg had taken all her nurslings to drink fresh new milk at a farm, and to see the young calves and lambs, and the brood of yellow ducklings at Gammer Stokes', and Rotha was up at the Vicarage helping Mary to arrange her plans for the Sunday-school treat.

"Austin has decided that it must be Burnley-upon-Sea this time," began Mary, as Rotha entered the room. Mary was sitting on her low chair by the open window, watching Arty playing on the lawn with his father. They were

attempting a game of cricket, with Jock and Jasper as long stops, and the root of an old tree for a stump. And to enhance the glory of the game, Arty had already scored up more than the Vicar. Arty had taken to a jacket and trousers now, and looked very boyish in his turned-down collar and blue ribbon. And Laurie, who was lying on the grass, lazily watching them with his broad-brimmed straw hat tilted over his eyes, was now a tall, thin stripling of fifteen, with a fair effeminate face, that had grown strangely like poor Belle's, and which bid fair to be almost as beautiful. In fact, Laurie's beauty and his laziness, his sweet voice and his lovable, indolent ways, often made Mary and the Vicar anxious about their boy's future. Mary on account of his delicacy, and the Vicar for fear that his talents should outstrip his energy. But they need not have feared if they could have known the future. For the seeds of self-sacrifice and self-renunciation were somewhere hidden in Laurie's sweet nature, and came to light nobly at a fitting time; for having been trained by his own desire for the priesthood, he was one of the few who on the great day of intercession for the missions, consecrated his fresh young life to the arduous work of a missionary and among the names of those who were reckoned as the first fruits of that mighty prayer which pulsed through the

length and breadth of England was the name of Laurence Garton Ord.

And the mother who gave up the flower of her flock to this noble work, and the fair young creature who has promised to follow his fortunes as soon as he can make a home for her in that foreign clime, will long remember the day when Laurie, coming out from the Church "ruddy and beautiful" as a young David, walked silently home beside them, and then, putting his arm round his mother, told them that he had dedicated himself to a distant ministry, and asked his father's blessing on his undertaking.

But on this May afternoon in question, Laurie was nothing but a fair-haired stripling, graceful and lazy enough indeed to justify Rotha's name, still applied to him, of "the little King." Rufus, loose-limbed and freckled still, but handsome enough in his mother's eyes, had joined his uncle long ago in New York, and was doing well. "As sturdy and independent and Rufus-like as ever," wrote Robert. While Guy and Reuben, fine young men now—Guy nearly twenty-one—were two young freshmen at Queen's. Reuben was a reading man, and bade fair to take high honours, but Guy had joined the boating set; they were still chums and inseparable, but Reuben, the younger and steadier, kept Guy straight, and pulled him up every now and then when his fun and inexhaustible spirit were likely to get him into

mischief. Both of them wrote to Rotha dutifully, and called her "the little mother," "Mother-rothe," as Guy somewhat wittily named her, but Rube's letters are the most affectionate and frequent. Five years have passed very lightly over Rotha Maturin : she is seven-and-twenty now, but she hardly looks it ; she is a little thin and pale, slightly grave perhaps, but the sweet face is as calm and good as ever ; and she looks a mere girl this afternoon in her fresh summer muslin, with her smooth brown hair and a breast-knot of lilies of the valley. There is a pretty dimple still when she speaks, and the large eyes grow bright and dark in a moment ; it is only in repose that a vague air of sadness still lingers—a quiet curve or two, an added thoughtfulness on the brow, which would tell a keen observer that Rotha Maturin has not been exempt from her woman's lot of love and suffering.

"Austin says it must be Burnley-upon-Sea, after all," repeated Mary.

"I am sorry for it," replied Rotha, quietly ; and then the Vicar threw down his bat, and came across the lawn to shake hands with Rotha.

Five years have made less havoc with the Vicar than with any one else ; he is not thinner, of course, and he continues to mourn over his superfluous weight, which he has sometimes been heard to declare is worse than even St. Paul's thorn in the flesh, but the kind benignant face is as

kind as ever, and the wide open grey eyes are quite as keen, but the crisp curls are slightly tinged with grey ; but Guy says his father is as young as ever, and Mary declares that Austin will never grow old, and the Vicar tells his wife privately, "that he is afraid that he is a boy still in his heart, for he likes a game as much as Arty does, only Arty runs faster and gets longer innings."

"Well, Mary, have you told Rotha the news?"

"No, dear ; I've been leaving it to you," returned his wife, smiling. "He has been dying to tell you himself, Rotha, and so I would not spoil his pleasure."

"Oh ! I know Nettie has another boy. I met George, and he told me all about it. Aunt Eliza is so disappointed—she wanted a girl this time ; she had quite made up her mind for a little Eliza, but Nettie and George both like sons best."

"My son's my son till he gets him a wife." Mary is always saying that ever since Guy danced eleven times with Laura Tregarthen. Poor Mary ! she does not understand calf-love ; she thinks, at nineteen boys ought to think of nothing but their mother."

"Now, Austin, I call that too bad. Laura was a little flirt, or she would never have gone on so with Guy ; and I do say, and say so still,

that Lady Tregarthen has very frivolous young sisters-in-law, and if Guy is to marry I hope he wont choose such a giddy little thing as Laura for his wife."

"My dear, Guy will fall in love possibly with a dozen Lauras before he hits upon the right one ; boys always do, and handsome ones like Guy especially ; but here we are talking about Nettie and Guy, and quarrelling as usual, and Rotha hasn't heard the news yet."

"I can guess it is good news though, by the way your Reverence is rubbing your hands," said Rotha, saucily.

"Ha, ha," laughed the Vicar, "so it is—so it is, little Sister. Capital news—first-rate news—old Bobus is coming home."

"Robert coming home!" returned Rotha, feeling suddenly rather giddy. She felt a quick flush rise to her face, and turning her back for a moment on them both, went to the table and busied herself in finding some work. "When is he coming?" she said from a safe distance.

"When? Oh, he may be here any day ; the letter has been detained, and ought to have reached us a week ago. He was on his way then. I will tell you all about it if you will leave that work alone and come here. I thought the news would have interested you."

"Oh, Mr. Ord!" returned Rotha, dismayed at this implied imputation of indifference. "Of

course I am glad he is coming home—poor Robert!” but her voice was not very steady, and her face was growing hotter than ever under the Vicar’s keen eyes. What would she have said if she had known that Robert in his despair had made his brother his confidant, and that Austin was looking at her and wondering whether Robert had really any chance, and whether he had been wrong in advising him to come home and try what three more years had done for him, and was speculating whether the sudden burning of Rotha’s face meant only confusion or pleasure.

He was to remain in doubt on this point, for Rotha now regained her self-possession.

“Is he bringing Rufus with him, or will he come alone?” she asked, presently.

“Oh no: Rufe is doing too well where he is, and Robert says that a year or two more of that work will be of great service to him; and that, though he is so young—barely eighteen—he is already a valuable assistant; he means to have him over by-and-by when an opening presents itself. Do you know, Rotha, I always guessed Mr. Ramsay would send for Robert when that accident disabled him—poor man! he will never be able to go down to his Works again.”

“And is Robert to be manager there?” asked Rotha, not lifting her eyes.

“Yes; manager and partner too, I believe. He is to have double the salary he now receives

to begin with. The firm are very loath to part with him, but Robert says that he hardly feels justified in throwing away such a chance, and especially to refuse Mr. Ramsay after what he has done for him. Don't you think he is right?"

"Quite right," returned Rotha, quickly, "only he said nothing to me about all this in his last letter, so I cannot help feeling a little surprised; I suppose he has made up his mind rather suddenly."

"Yes; he tells me that he had no idea when he last wrote. By-the-bye, that explains a rather misty paragraph. He says—let me see, what is it he really does say—oh! here it is—'I am afraid Rotha, for one, will think me somewhat inconsistent after what I once said to her, but I think you can explain my reasons for acting on this sudden impulse, and why I cannot feel justified in refusing so kind a friend and benefactor as Mr. Ramsay;—a man may sometimes alter his mind without being open to the imputation of weakness;—there, perhaps, you can interpret that mysterious clause better than Mary and I can:'" but Rotha said nothing, and coloured so exceedingly that the Vicar rather abruptly changed the subject, and Mary, after a few warm expressions of pleasure at the thought of seeing dear Robert again, and wondering how he would look, and when he would arrive, and telling Rotha that Deb and she had been beau-

tifying and arranging the spare room that very morning for his reception in case he should come any day, took up the subject of the school treat again; and assured Rotha for the third time that the Vicar and Arthur Tregarthen had already fixed on Burnley-upon-Sea. " You see we have exhausted all the places. We were at Nab Scar last year, and at Finnock's Hollow the summer before, and Burnley is so near, and the children can go by train, and it is so much less fatiguing for the teachers than jolting over those country roads in open carts ; so if you don't mind, dear—being your treat—Austin thinks he could save you expense and trouble that way, for the season is not far enough advanced to go a long distance—and the gardener's wife at the head of the glen could boil our kettles for us, and it would not be far to carry the hampers ; you know Austin can always get license for us."

Rotha was silent for a moment. It was more than five years ago now since Garton and Reuben and she had spent the day there, but she had only been there once since, and then quite alone. It was summer then, and she had walked where they had walked, and sat in the same place where she had sat, and dreamt of the fairy prince, and then lifted up her eyes to see Garton striding through the dim woodland aisles. She had taken a mournful pleasure in thus following

his footprints, and in thinking what he had said and how he had looked, and it had seemed as though the very place were sacred to her ; it would jar on her sadly to see it again surrounded by merry and shouting children ; but she now banished this thought as selfish, and quietly told Mary that if the Vicar wished it, there was nothing more to be said, and then, in her usual self-forgetful way, tried to throw herself into her friends' plans, and to calculate the number of buns and the pounds of seed and plum cake that would be wanted, but she had never found it such hard work to keep her attention on anything —she made a mistake in her addition twice, and Mary, with placid surprise, put her right.

She was undecided too, till the last minute, whether Meg should not go in her place ; but on Mrs. Ord objecting to this, on the ground that it was Rotha's treat, and that she need not do anything to tire herself ; that the children would amuse themselves, and that there was nothing but to give them their tea, and marshal them to the train, she reluctantly consented ; and then scolded herself again for her selfishness, and told Mary that she was getting old and lazy, but of course she would go, and that perhaps Meg would be glad to be spared the fatigue ; and when this was settled she rose to take her leave.

“ But Rotha dear, Meg is out, and Austin fully

expects that you are going to stay to tea," pleaded Mrs. Ord, "and we have not half discussed dear Robert's coming home." But Rotha would not be persuaded ; she had some work to do for her children, she said, and should rather enjoy a quiet evening. She felt stupid and tired, and her head ached a little, and if Mary did not mind she would come round in the morning and arrange everything for Thursday, and she thought after all the Vicar had been right in fixing on Burnley.

If Rotha had any work to do she certainly did not do it that evening. Meg found her sitting at her window, looking out at the sunset, as though she had been doing little else for hours.

It would be difficult to describe Rotha's exact feelings when she heard of the news of Robert's speedy arrival ; but from the moment the words "he may come any day" had been spoken, a curious mixture of confusion, terror, and excitement had thrown her into such a whirl of conflicting emotions that she hardly realized herself what his coming home would be to her.

Three years had passed since she had answered that passionate letter of Robert's, and the correspondence which had been carried on between them had been in a measure somewhat constrained on both sides. Robert's letters especially had been brief and rather forced ; and

though he had never referred to his disappointment since then, even in the most distant manner, it was in a way brought home to Rotha in every word. Robert never spoke of himself now, never even answered her friendly questions as to his health and prospects. His letters related mainly to Rotha and her affairs, every trifle to which she had alluded was canvassed and magnified ; but the unrestrained outpourings of the writer's heart seemed kept in check and forced back by a strong hand ; only a tenderer phrase than usual sometimes conveyed to her that the writer himself was unchanged, patient but hopeless, and perhaps no eloquence could have touched Rotha's heart more deeply than those letters, so brief, yet so suggestive—so thoughtful for her, so forgetful of himself.

Once he had been ill, but Rotha never heard of it till long afterwards. He had met with an accident, and inflammation and fever had set in, and Austin told her one day very gravely, that his life had been despaired of for days, and his recovery was chiefly owing to the watchful nursing of his landlady and her daughter.

Rotha wrote a reproachful letter to Robert after that, a letter full of sisterly affection and tenderness ; but he wrote back in a little surprise, thanking her for her kindness. "I should not have thought that you would have cared so much whether I lived or died," it said.



“ I never fancy that I am much good to any one, or to myself either. I sometimes think that my life has been a failure, and that it would be better to go to one’s long rest than to labour without hope in the heat of the day. When the labourer is weary he can go home. I have no home—not a soul belonging to me but Austin ; the only woman who loved me lies under the grass sod. Sometimes I wonder why God permits such loneliness, such desolate hearths, such broken ‘denied lives.’ Forgive me, Rotha, I am weak still from recent illness, or I should not write like this. Just now, Rachel, my faithful nurse, brought me some nourishment, and told me I was getting faint, and must be more careful of myself. I will not tell you how I thanked her,—I was very ungrateful, and she went away with her eyes full of tears. Rachel is a good creature. She thinks I ought to put a higher value on my life. She little knows—There, I will not finish that sentence. Good-night, Rotha. Thank you for your goodness to me, dear—I was going to write ‘Sister,’—but I have sworn never to call you by that name. I will substitute ‘Friend.’—There ; it is cold enough—it makes me shiver—but many a man might think himself rich with such an one, but not when he is sick and solitary—growing old, but still far enough off his end—as I am, Rotha. Adieu. ROBERT.”

That was the last letter Rotha had received, nearly three months ago, and now he was coming home. She showed no one that letter, but put it away with mingled feelings of pleasure and pain. It was hardly in woman's nature not to be touched and made proud by this passionate fidelity—this patient hopelessness. For the first time she lost sight of Garton's love, to wonder upon the length and breadth of this man's affection, that could survive distance and time and disappointment, that could refuse to be satisfied with the crumbs of her comfort, and yet hunger on so nobly. "Could Garton have loved me better?" she thought, as though for the first time she realized Robert's feelings in all their intensity, and a little fear and trembling seized her. She thought, "What if he should ever renew his suit? would her purpose remain as unflinching and steadfast as it had done three years ago? Would Garton wish it? Would Belle? But at this point she always broke off shrinking from her own thoughts, trembling and blushing even in the darkness, and folding her hands, would pray that He who had guided her through her troubled youth, and had brought her feet out on these pleasant places, would lead her still through the shadows of the future in a plain path; "oh Lord," she prayed, but not now as before, "because of my enemies."

These petitions always calmed her, but to-night



they failed. The mere recollection of the words “coming any day” threw her into a state of distressing restlessness and excitement, a longing to go away somewhere, to fly from some inevitable fate seemed to come upon her. She resolved to eschew the Vicarage, to shut herself up in the fortress of Bryn, to live at the “Home,” to do anything in short to put off the evil day of their meeting; and yet such was her inconsistency, that she longed to be somewhere that she might see him without his being aware of her presence. “Just to see him, and to be sure that it is Robert, and he is well and safe, and to go away where he could not find me, or ever say what he said to me in those dreadful letters.”

These were some of Rotha’s thoughts; but it would be difficult to describe half of them. The leading idea seemed to be terror at what Robert might say to her, and yet in her secret heart she rejoiced at the knowledge that he was still unchanged; she fell asleep trying to recollect the contents of his last letter, and awoke depressed and restless, and passed a most unsatisfactory day, and, as often happened, everything fitted in with her mood now. The children were troublesome, and Caroline had a raging toothache and was obliged to go down to the Infirmary. Meg was called off in the middle of the afternoon by the Vicar, and Rotha had to take her place just as she was most longing for quiet.

The children had got through their stage of fractiousness by this time, and were playing at Nebuchadnezzar and the burning fiery furnace. The game struck Rotha as slightly profane, but she was languid and lacked energy to interfere. It struck her as rather droll, however, that Shirtle Pearl, who was still there, should enact the part of Nebuchadnezzar and the Golden Image too, and she got once or twice slightly confused over it; and she could not understand for a long time why the youngest boy there should be playing the Jew's-harp industriously in the corner, till he told Shirtle, crossly, that he wasn't going to play Dulcimers for ever, and that he thought it a stupid game, which woke her up in earnest; and after she had reprimanded Shirtle, gravely, and had taken the refractory band on her lap, she told them a story, and then made them sing the hymns Meg had taught them, and told them softly about the Child Christ, who had come to their beds when they were little and weak, with his arms full of tiny crosses, and had laid one down by the side of each child, bidding them carry them bravely for His sake.

"And what sort of cross did the Child Christ leave you, Shirtle?" asked Rotha.

"I think it was a knobbly one, Mother," returned Shirtle, promptly, for Shirtle was an orphan, a mere waif and stray cast upon Thornborough Streets, and Rotha had classed him

among her adopted children. "A wery knobbly one, bursting out with abysses and such like."

"I should think being almost dark is worser than abysses," put in Sallie, a diminutive child with a patient sickly face, and a shade over her eyes. "Shirtle can learn to spell, and cast up, and read pretty picture books, though his bones is so sore that he cries sometimes."

"But Sallie can pick up shells and dig on the sand, and feel the sweet sea-breeze—can she not?" returned Rotha, putting her hand tenderly on the cropped head, for she knew that by-and-by it would be quite dark, and not almost, with Sallie. "And what did the Child Christ say to little Sallie when he laid on her this heavy cross?"

"Carry it and it will carry you," returned the child, in her shrill little voice.

"Yes, and heavy as it is, it is not so heavy as His—we must remember that. And when do we lay down our crosses, children?"

"Never," returned one, and "When we die," responded others; and one small boy opined, "When their backs ached or they were tired;" but he was a cripple and a hunchback, and spoke feebly, and every one knew that poor Teddy was breaking down under the weight of his."

"Oh, Teddie, I wish we could," said Rotha, with a compassionate glance at the deformed boy. "I wish we could lay them down, Teddie; sometimes, you and Sallie and I—when we are so

tired, and our hearts and arms are so sore with the weight ;” and in that fanciful imagery so dear to children, she told them they must lie down in their narrow beds with their crosses beside them to the last—they and their crosses under the shadow of one mighty one ; and how they must carry them right up to the Golden Gate itself, and there laying them down for ever should receive tiny jewelled crowns ; and where their crosses had fallen should spring up roses, white and red, and lilies fairer than any they had seen, and the Child Christ should lead them into the City—cripples, and blind, and suffering no longer. “ Now children, sing the hymn Meg taught you last Sunday,” and the children united their weak, quavering voices and sang “ We are but little children weak,” but the Dulcimer had gone fast asleep, and Teddie came and laid his heavy head against Rotha’s dress.

CHAPTER XV.

WON AT LAST.

“Some one came and rested there beside me,
 Speaking words I never thought would bless
 Such a loveless life ; I longed to hide me,
 Feasting lonely on my happiness.
 But the voice I heard,
 Pleaded for a word,
 Till I gave my whispered answer, ‘ Yes.’

“Yes ; that little word so calmly spoken,
 Changed all life for me, my own, my own !
 All the cold grey spell I saw upbroken,
 All the twilight days seemed past and gone,
 And how warm and bright
 In the ruddy light,
 Pleasant June days of the future shone !

“So we wandered through the gate together,
 Hand in hand, upon our future way,
 Leaving shade and cold behind for ever,
 Out to where the sun’s westerling ray
 Gave a promise fair
 Of such beauty rare
 For the dawning of another day.”

HELEN MARION BURNSIDE.

THE Sunday School treat was fixed for the following day, and when the children were safe in their dormitories Rotha meant to go round to the Vicarage to make the final arrangements with Mrs. Ord.

It was a lovely evening, and the setting sun

streamed into the long low room where Rotha sat among the little ones ; the children had broken down in the middle of the hymn, and Rotha's sweet voice took up the refrain and hummed it softly with a sort of weird accompaniment from Teddie ; the rest crooned out a dolorous chorus of " We don't know it, Mother," when the garden gate suddenly clicked. Fidgets, who was fast asleep, got up and limped to the door on three legs and began a furious barking, every hair bristling with excitement. Firm footsteps crunched up the garden path, voices were heard in the little passages, the door of the Mother's room opened and closed quickly.

" Run and tell the Vicar I am here, Joe !" said Rotha, breaking off her humming, " and children, don't forget to get up and curtsey to his Reverence."

" May we come in, little Sister ?" said the Vicar's cheerful voice over Joe's head. " Don't let the children disturb themselves, they look far too comfortable. No, don't come in just yet," he continued to somebody in the background. " Guess what visitor I have brought to see you, Rotha ?"

" That is not hardly fair," returned a well-remembered voice ; " let me introduce myself, Austin." A firm hand puts the Vicar aside—a dark figure blocks up the entry, a tall man, grey-haired, with a worn, beautiful face. Rotha stands

up, white and trembling, with the sleeping boy still in her arms—it is Robert !

" Rotha, are you surprised to see me ? I did not mean to startle you like this."

Her only disengaged hand is taken and pressed kindly, and then, thoughtful as ever, Robert replaces her in her seat. She has not spoken one word of welcome, not one, except that low uttered " Robert!"—but her heart is beating so that she can hardly breathe.

" That is not a very warm greeting after five years' absence," says the Vicar, mischievously ; and Robert, gravely as before, just touches her cheek with his lips, and says quietly " that Austin has brought him in to see the little Sister in the midst of her children, and that he is glad to see her looking so strong and well," and so on. All spoken in the same calm, kind, manner, as though the blood that swept over Rotha's pale face did not stir every pulse within him, at the thought that he had the power to stir her thus, that those burning blushes and quivering lips could not mean only that he had taken her unawares.

" I hope you do not mind my bringing him in like this ? Robert was so anxious to see you," said the Vicar, trying to put a stop to this painful embarrassment. " You are so completely one of us, you know, Rotha ; and Mary said she was sure you would be pleased to see him."

"I am very pleased," returned Rotha, finding her voice with difficulty. "When did you come," lifting her eyes timidly to Robert, who was leaning against the mantelpiece watching her.

"Only an hour ago; I got off the dust of my journey, and talked to Mary and Austin a little, and then Mary proposed our coming round to fetch you. How well dear Mary looks to be sure, and as pretty as ever, only her hair is so grey—not so grey as mine though." And he tossed it carelessly from his forehead as he spoke. "Don't you think me very changed, Rotha?"

"Very much changed, Robert. You look as though you had been very ill," she returned, softly. She was regaining her calmness at the sight of him, but her colour still varied dangerously.

Yes, he was changed, wonderfully so; but she thought she had never seen a nobler face. His dark hair was quite iron-grey, though he was hardly more than thirty-six now; and his face was thinner and paler, and the forehead deeply lined. But the hard-set curve of the lips had relaxed, and the curve round the mouth was exceedingly sweet and sorrowful; only when he smiled, which he did rarely, his smile was like Gar's.

"I was very near death," he returned, reading the unspoken sympathy in her eyes. "I suppose, if I had not been with good Samaritans, it would soon have been all over with me. Rachel

cried when she received your present, Rotha. When I gave it to her, I said it was so like the little Sister that Austin talks about."

He had used the Vicar's title twice ; but not as though he had appropriated it. Was it merely to put her at her ease with him, or to remind her that he had no hope ? Somehow the name jarred on her for the first time.

" You do not find Rotha much altered, do you, Robert ?" struck in the Vicar, briskly. Rotha's eyes fell again before Robert's swift keen glance.

" No, she is not a day older. How do you manage to preserve your youth, Rotha, you look so young ? And do you always wear that little cap ? Do you know, it reminds me of the day I met you first in the Castle gardens ? You had a cap on then, had you not ?"

" No ; only a lace kerchief tied over my hair," returned Rotha, with a smile. " This is our uniform, Meg's and mine," she continued, hurriedly. She knew intuitively why Robert looked so grave. Would he ever forget that day when he saw her under the low apple trees, a slim creature in her black dress ? It made her speak to him in her own frank way to see that look of pain on his face. " Meg will be so glad to see you, Robert."

" Ah, to be sure. Poor Mrs. Carruthers ! I was so sorry to hear about her troubles ; but you told me in one of your last letters that she has

been more settled ever since. How good you have been, Rotha, to write to me so often."

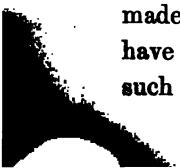
" You were lonely, and I knew you would like to hear everything," she returned, beginning to get hot again.

" You have no idea what letters she can write," he continued, turning to his brother, who had half-a-dozen of the children round his knee, and was talking to them in an undertone. " They used to be like a series of pictures to me, and clever pictures too. I don't think all these five years I have ever had to ask after anybody."

" We did not know you were a scribe, Rotha," returned the Vicar, laughing ; " but here we are keeping Mary and tea waiting. Do you know we have orders to carry you off?"

" Yes, I know ; but I do not think I can leave just yet. I have my working dress on, and the children are not in bed, and——"

" Perhaps not," interrupted the Vicar ; " but Mrs. Carruthers is on her way to help Caroline, so that excuse has fallen through. And as for the working dress, if you want to honour Robert by a festive attire, we will willingly escort you to Bryn ; but I can assure you that that grey serge is quite as becoming in our eyes as grey silk would be." A mischievous little speech which made Robert smile, and after which Rotha would have gone in grey sackcloth if there were such a material ; but as she still hesitated, though



for far different reasons, Robert settled the matter by lifting the drowsy Dulcimer off her lap, and taking out his watch, told her that they would wait for her just five minutes ; a bit of peremptoriness which reminded her of the old Robert Ord, and brought one of her sunny smiles back in an instant.

Rotha was in a curious state of mind all the evening—an uneasy sort of happiness too nearly approaching nervous excitement to quite deserve that name, seemed to be the prominent feeling ; it was very strange and very pleasant to have Robert back again. Now for the first time she realized how she had missed him, and what a blank his absence had made. The Vicarage had never looked so like itself for five years, and the Vicar seemed so wondrously content and so proud of Robert ; and Mother Mary had got her old name back again ; and the boys hung about their uncle eager for news of Rufus ; and the family tea-table had never looked more cheerful than it did to-night.

Rotha was very quiet, and kept in the background all the evening, but no one seemed to notice it. For Robert and Austin had so much to say to each other, and were so busy in discussing the former's prospects, and every one had so many things to tell him and so much to hear, that no one seemed to perceive what a silent listener Rotha was ; and though now and then

Robert turned to her with a quiet word or smile, as though to show her presence was by no means forgotten, he never once strove to bring her into the conversation. But more than once the uneasy conviction seized her, that her silence was understood and respected. And deeply as this thoughtfulness and delicacy touched her, it made her still more conscious. Now and then she started and flushed painfully as some tone or some expression of Robert's recalled Garton vividly. She had never thought the brothers alike, but a hundred times this evening some trick or turn of Robert's voice brought him before her. Now and then she could look at him unperceived, and then she was struck afresh by the great change in him; and once or twice it crossed her, of what noble metal the man must have been made, that the fire of suffering had so purified and strengthened him.

She had been perfectly content in her quiet corner, but she was more than ever tongue-tied and embarrassed when he walked with her to her own door. A dread of being alone with him, a terror of what he might say under these circumstances, was strong within her when she went out of the Vicarage gate. But she need not have been afraid. Robert seemed bent on putting her at her ease. Nothing could exceed his quiet gentleness. He spake about the beauty of the night, and asked Rotha if she ever took long

walks now. And he described an excursion Rufus and he had taken, which lasted till they had got to Bryn ; and then he shook hands with her and bade her good-night, as though he had been doing so every evening for the last five years.

Rotha gave up her thoughts in despair when she reached her own room. To disentangle and arrange such a hopeless confusion of ideas was next to impossible. A sense of disappointment and regret—inconsistent regret—at Robert's calmness and brotherly kindness, were the paramount feelings ; it increased her admiration and respect tenfold, but it humiliated her. He had loved her for five years, and only three months ago had hinted at his despair. But now he was by far the calmer of the two, and she herself had been taken unawares, and had betrayed her embarrassment in a hundred ways. The calmer of the two!—what if she had looked out that very moment and seen the lonely figure pacing up and down the sea-wall for hours?—could see him standing in the moonlight beside Belle's grave, and leaning his hot brow against the marble cross, and could hear him say—“ Dearer than ever—the one face—the one woman in the world—to me. Oh, my God ! to see her every day and not to win her, will be more than I can bear. I must, I will win her ! Something tells me that I shall, Rotha. It may be still my Rotha !”

The next day was that appointed for the school treat, and Rotha had promised to be round at the Vicarage as early as possible to help Mary and Aunt Eliza pack the hampers. But early as it was, Robert had already started for Stretton, where he would probably be detained the greater part of the morning.

Rotha felt a little chill of disappointment, for she had quite made up her mind to be her old self with him to-day. It relieved her therefore, and sent quite a glow of satisfaction to her heart, when the Vicar casually remarked to Aunt Eliza, that she would certainly have her wish to see Robert gratified that very afternoon; for he had promised him faithfully to take the four o'clock train from Blackscar, and to be present at the distribution of buns; and as he always kept his word, she might be certain that he would make his appearance at the time specified.

Rotha said nothing, but she worked with redoubled zeal, and at the appointed hour joined the phalanx of teachers and children on the Blackscar platform, looking singularly appropriate to the occasion in her pretty spring dress—a soft blue—with her white chip hat. Dress always set off Rotha, but she never looked prettier than she did to-day, as Mary remarked to the Vicar and to Aunt Eliza about half-a-dozen times.

There was nothing worth recording in the

afternoon itself. As in most other school treats, the children were wild with pleasure, and ran all over the glens like a herd of young colts. Rotha strove once or twice, in quiet moments, to bring back the sweet and mournful associations of the place, but for once the effort was manifest. The day was so glorious, the sunshine so bright, the play of light and shade so delicious in the bosky dells and hollows, the little river ran underneath so brimming over with ripples and tiny gurgles of joy, the children's mirth was so infectious, the knots of eager rosy faces such warm vivid pictures set in the green bowery depths, that a less happy nature than Rotha's must have expanded to the cheering influences ; and—more than one bright—thought kept her pulses beating to a tune they had not heard for many a long year, as she walked up and down the shady walks, or sat on one of the tiny lawns, keeping watch and ward over the little ones. But about five o'clock, when the children were ranged in orderly files on one of the green lawns, and the Vicar was called upon to say grace, Rotha's eyes often wandered to the little white gate, in the hope of seeing a tall figure advancing from the road ; but tea was over and the children scattered to their games again, but still no Robert made his appearance.

Mr. Townsend, the Vicar of Burnley, had just entered the gardens, and Rotha was slightly sur-

prised when, after a brief conversation, our Vicar walked quickly to the gate with him. She was tolerably near them, and saw that both looked rather grave and anxious, our Vicar especially ; and the latter spoke almost irritably to some boys who surrounded him with entreaties to join their game.

“ Run away, children, I can’t attend to you now. Now, Sam, don’t block up our way, please. Mr. Townsend and I have business in the town.” And he swung round one small lad who was in his path so hastily that he nearly tripped him up.

“ Elliot,” said Rotha, addressing a young Sunday-school teacher who had been with the Vicar most of the time, “ what has Mr. Townsend been saying to make the Vicar look so grave ?”

“ Haven’t you heard ?” returned young Elliot, eagerly. “ All the teachers have been talking about it : there’s been an accident to the Black-scar train—some collision, I believe ; and two or three people have been killed right off. Murray heard it in the town.”

Rotha turned suddenly white, and then began to shiver.

“ What train, Elliot ?”

“ Why, the four o’clock from Blackscar—a goods train or something ran into it. There are not many people hurt—only the engine driver and the stoker and one passenger were killed right off. The line wont be clear for another



hour or two, and that's why the Vicar has gone up to the station."

"No, no," returned Rotha, half beside herself, "don't you know his brother was to be in that train? Oh, Elliot! for mercy's sake, don't say anything to Mrs. Ord. Suppose anything has happened to his brother. There, go, go; don't you see Mr. Tregarthen is calling you?"

"We are going to take some of the children on the pier," called out Arthur Tregarthen; "the ladies and the younger ones can stop behind, if they like. You know there is no possibility of getting home for another hour or two."

Rotha heard no more. She was in a high winding walk, just under the suspension bridge and near the entrance to the gardens, and feeling giddy, and even her limbs tottering, she sat down, thankful that no one was witness to her violent agitation.

A collision—a railway accident—and he was in it, that was her first thought; he—Robert—Garton's brother, the man who had loved her so patiently and so hopelessly for more than five years, and whom, as she knew too well by this terrible heartache, she was already beginning to love in return. Poor Rotha! it needed this shock to reveal the real nature of her feelings for Robert. For months past—ever since his last letter—she had been fighting against her own heart, and hiding her eyes like a child from the

destiny that was in store for her. This had been the secret of her trembling eagerness to escape a meeting. One word from him whose fidelity she had so severely tested might in a moment, she knew, overthrow the resolutions of years. And if she had doubted her heart even yesterday, one glance at Robert's noble face, with its evidence of suffering, would have undeceived her ; and now—now—when he might be lost to her for ever—mortally hurt, or even dead—now did she realize for the first time that, however she might have tried to blind herself, her heart was assuredly and entirely his.

But to have another lover destroyed in such a cruel way — impossible — merciful God ! — impossible.

“ Why are you sitting here alone, Rotha ? and where are they all gone ? Good heavens, are you ill, Rotha ? ”

He might have thought so by the way she uncovered her white face and looked at him, and then clung to his arm with her two hands, trembling from head to foot.

“ Robert, is it really you—alive—unhurt ? Oh, Robert, Robert, what a fright you have given us. Oh, I thought it must be too terrible to be true,” cried the girl, with her eyes brimming over and her face perfectly radiant.

“ What is too terrible ? Do you mean you have heard of the accident to the Blackscar

train ? I galloped round as fast as Mr. Ramsay's horse would take me, that I might arrive before any one heard of the affair. I was afraid Austin would be frightened, but I hardly thought—I hardly hoped—that——”

He did not finish his sentence, but his own face worked, and he was evidently greatly moved at this frank expression of joy at his safe return. For the moment he held the little hands tightly in his, and then, with a sudden impulse, lifted first one and then the other to his lips.

“ I did not expect such a sweet welcome, Rotha. “ How could you—how could you care so much, my darling ? ”

But Rotha, scarlet and confounded at her own impulsive words, started away from him like a young fawn.

“ Where is the Vicar, Robert ? We must go and tell the Vicar ; he has gone down to the station with Mr. Townsend.”

“ Come, then,” said Robert, holding out his hand, with a smile.

He had no wish to take advantage of the sweet impulse that had made her cling to him. For this evening at least he would respect the shy reticence that had grown out of her impulsiveness. He walked beside her with a proud and swelling heart, but outwardly as calm and kind as ever ; but Rotha, who had overheard his last words, drooped her head and answered in

monosyllables, and, as soon as she caught sight of the Vicar, she took shelter under his wing directly.

The Vicar did not say much, but he looked from one to the other, and held out his hand to Robert with an unsteady smile.

"We have had a terrible fright, Robert, and I hear Edward Elliot told her, and so she knew it too. I would not go through the last half-hour again for half my income. By what providential means did you manage to miss your train?"

"Mr. Ramsay detained me, Austin; and while I was waiting on the platform, chafing like a blind fool at the tiresome delay, we got news of the collision just outside Leatham Junction; and knowing what a horrible state you would be in, I went round to the Mews, where I had just stabled Mr. Ramsay's bay mare, and rode her off to Burnley as hard as I could, and here I am."

"For His mercy endureth for ever," ejaculated the Vicar. "Oh, Bob, if I had been called upon to lose another brother—and you only just come home." And Robert touched by Austin's agitation, linked his arm in Austin's and the two walked away together.

The line was pretty clear by this time, and the officials informed the Vicar that a special train would be ready in half an hour. So Rotha went down on the pier with the other teachers to marshal the children and hunt after stragglers.

The work and the cool sea breezes did her good, and she was successful in holding herself aloof from Robert during the return journey. She got into a different compartment ; and as soon as they reached Blackscar, she headed the first division of the children to the school-house, where they were to receive a final bun each ; and Robert, who had to see after his horse, was left far enough behind.

Rotha left the other teachers at the school-house and went off alone ; in reality to get herself quieted and cooled down for the evening, for Mrs. Ord had made her promise to come to the Vicarage to supper, to talk over the events of the day. The church was always open, and it seemed to her the quietest place ; it did not matter one bit that Meg was playing there, she slipped into a dark pew by the door, and listened to the solemn strains, feeling rested and soothed in spite of herself. She was so absorbed by the music and her own thoughts as well, that she was quite unaware that after a time she had been followed, and that a tall dark figure had silently entered and taken up its station near her, awed and silenced by the weird music that seemed to peal out of the semi-darkness.

Rotha rose and went out after a time, and then paused as usual by Belle's grave to re-adjust the wreath which always hung over the cross.

Yesterday Rotha had placed a fresh one, made of sweet spring flowers, but already it was withered; a mournful conviction that this withered garland was a meet emblem of Belle's unfinished life and broken hopes crept over Rotha, and as she laid her cheek to the marble cross, where only last night Robert had rested his weary head, she said, more than half aloud—

“Poor Belle! how well she loved him; but I can understand it now. Ah, it is coming, dear, I know it, I am sure of it, if only Gar would have had it so!”

“What is coming, Rotha? Why would Gar not have it so? Dear, I did not mean to startle you. I could not help following you here.” A hand is laid softly on her arm—the voice is very calm and reassuring. What does she fear, that she lays her cheek only the closer to the marble cross, and clings more tightly to its smooth stoniness?

Only a churchyard—a white gleaming cross—the moon shining from behind a bank of dark fleecy clouds; only a tale of love told over a grassy mound; only a girl listening to it with her arms entwined about the marble head stone; only the tears from happy eyes, watering the dead girl's grave with dews of blessing for the living, and a voice with a tender break in it like Gar's says—

“Just one word, Rotha—one word to tell me



that you have listened and heard. Or if you cannot speak, put your hand in mine and I shall understand you then."

What if her hand goes out to him in the darkness; what if strong arms draw her from her stony support, and gather her close to a faithful breast; can she check those happy tears, flowing all the faster for his mute tenderness? Presently when she grows calmer, she lifts up her face to him—that dear face which he has learnt to read so clearly now—and asks him, will he take her back into the church for a little while.

And as he yields in some little surprise, the music breaks into some grander measure, swelling triumphant down the echoing aisles; and then he understands how that this is their betrothal, and kneels beside her in that mute thanksgiving prayer of hers; and then as the music ceases and Meg leaves the organ, Rotha comes out of the porch hand in hand with Robert, and walks down with him to the Vicarage.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

"Ah, who am I, that God hath saved
 Me from the doom I did desire,
 And crossed the lot myself had craved,
 To set me higher?
 What have I done that He should bow ;
 From heaven to choose a wife for me ?
 And what deserved He should endow
 My home with Thee !"JEAN INGELOW.

. "My story is told out; the day
 Draws out its shadows, time doth overtake
 The morning. That which endeth call a lay
 Sang after pause—a motto in the break
 Between two chapters of a tale not new
 Nor joyful, but a common tale. Adieu!"IBID.

THEY were at supper at the Vicarage when they entered, but Mrs. Ord had hardly time for a reproachful exclamation, before the Vicar, after one glance at Rotha's happy, blushing face, had jumped from his seat, and had fairly taken the little Sister in his arms:

"Is it so? God bless you, my dear child. You have made us all very happy. Won at last, and bravely too. Dear old Bobus! there, take her to Mary."

But Mary, startled and overwhelmed by what were to her such utterly unexpected tidings, could only hold Rotha in her arms and cry over



her, and hope inarticulately that she would be happy, very happy.

"That she shall be, God helping me," said Robert, quietly. "Mother Mary, are you not going to wish me happiness too?"

And as he stooped his handsome head over her, she put back the grey waves of hair tenderly from his forehead, and whispered, "Dear Robert, I am so glad, and our darling would be glad too," and then hid her face, poor Mary, on his shoulder and cried, remembering how, ten years ago, he had come to her for her sisterly congratulations.

"Dear Mary, I understand you."

It was a proof of Robert's new gentleness that he should soothe this burst of natural feeling so patiently and kindly. Rotha was looking shy and almost sad over this little scene, but Robert soon came to her side with a quiet, happy smile, and Austin soon cheered up his wife, and the remainder of the evening passed like a delightful dream. Robert walked as usual with Rotha to her own door, but before they parted he said a grave word or two that somewhat upset her.

"I shall leave everything to you, Rotha, but don't let it be long before you come to me. For five years I waited for a blessing which never came, and for five more I suffered almost hopeless, and now I feel as though many of my best years are gone, but you must

'come to me soon, dear, and make me young again."

Rotha pondered over these words, and grew hot and cold over them, but for a little time nothing more was said to mar the beautiful serenity of those first few days, when Robert and she were always together; and she learnt hour by hour to appreciate still more fully the noble nature of the man who was to be her future husband; when the traces of his past faults became beauties in her eyes, and she could realize more and more that it was good to lean on the strong arm that was to be hers through life.

Rotha had respite for a little while, during which she learnt to know herself and Robert more thoroughly; days during which Meg and Mary were never weary of praising the sweet face that had grown so calm and trustful under its new happiness; and then came a day when Mary came to her, and the Vicar, and when Robert pleaded in a few manly, strong words that there should be no delay, no dallying with time.

"I shall never grow younger, darling, and I think you know me well enough by this time to trust me with your happiness. Come to me. I want my wife, to have her dear presence always near me, strengthening me."

And Rotha, with the look of meek love she already bore for him, slipping her little hand in his, said—

"Whenever you like, dear Robert, and the Vicar wishes," and quietly yielded the point, when they all said that it was no use waiting till the autumn, but that they thought she might be ready by the middle of August; and when it was pressed upon her, Rotha said she thought so too.

Mary and Meg soon had their hands full of delightful business, and Rotha was quite passive in their hands. She did everything that her friends thought right. One or two of the rooms in Bryn were to be remodelled for the new master, and Meg, by her own desire, was to take up her abode in the Children's Home.

Rotha took far more interest in these arrangements than in ordering her fine new dresses. She made Robert come up to Bryn and look at his old rooms before the painters and white-washers turned everything topsy-turvy. Robert was strangely moved at these evidences of his boyhood, and at Rotha's care in preserving them. He knew all about her full-grown heir by this time, for one day the Vicar basely betrayed her confidence in her presence. Robert went all over Bryn from the garret to the basement, telling Rotha many anecdotes of his old life. He made her show him Aunt Charlotte's jewels, and further stipulated that the pearls were to be worn on her wedding-day; and before he left he drew her to him and told her, in grave, tender tones, how her generosity and

magnanimity had humiliated him long years ago, and how the bitterness of his accusation had recoiled upon himself, and made his life for a long time barren ; and how little he deserved to spend his future days under the shelter of that roof, from which his bad temper and obstinacy had driven him ; and how still less he deserved the crowning glory of her love.

" My future life shall be one long act of gratitude and atonement if I am spared," he finished ; and Rotha, who knew his faithfulness and integrity, felt certain he would keep his words.

The summer, with its pleasant courting days, passed away only too quickly for Rotha. Robert spent all his leisure hours with her, either at Bryn or the Vicarage. He had a horse of his own now, a wedding present from Mr. Ramsay, and rode to and from Stretton every morning and evening. By-and-by, when it was stabled at Bryn, a beautiful bay mare made its appearance from the same munificent donor, and Robert ordered a riding-habit from London, and taught Rotha to ride, and was not at all surprised when she made a splendid horsewoman.

" My wife does everything well," was a speech very often in Robert's mouth.

But at present Rotha had neither horse nor habit ; but was quite content when Robert took her out for long country walks in the sweet summer evenings. They went over to Burnley

once or twice, and Rotha told Robert all the girlish fancies she had had in the dim wintry woods.

But she loved best to take him to her Children's Home, and see him gather the children round his knee and tell them stories of the New World and its wonders ; and before long, Rotha found she would have a true helpmate in all her benevolent schemes. Robert's large-heartedness and his secret ways of doing good were proverbial in the family ; he threw himself into Rotha's plans for the new Home with an enthusiasm which surprised her, until she learnt more and more how his deep still nature loved to do good for its own sake, and thought nothing too small if it could benefit a suffering brother or sister.

" You can build the Home if you like next summer, Rotha," he said to her one day. " I have been looking over your accounts as you wish, and I see you have a large surplus sum at the bankers, in spite of your munificent deed of gifts to Reuben and Guy ; and although the expenses of your two sons' education are very great, I think we can afford it, for I am a tolerably rich man now, and Laurie is going to be my charge."

" We can do so and so"—how sweet that used to sound in Rotha's ears. Never to be alone any more, to have Robert to work with her, to direct her with his man's counsel, and

strengthen her hands with his praise ; what a rest to the lonely girl who had fought such a fierce battle, and who had accepted her bitter stewardship so bravely ! No need to keep it all for him any longer, who prized one word of love from her lips more than the wealth and comforts she could give him ; no need to keep it all for him—all for him—when she had given herself into that faithful keeping.

It was the evening before her marriage ; it had been a busy trying day in spite of Meg's efforts to lighten her labours ; and Rotha, when she came down to Robert, looked pale and harassed, a trifle moved from her serenity. And Robert understanding how she felt, took her down on the shore, that the fresh sea breezes might blow her fatigue away, and let her stand there silently by his side undisturbed by questioning, till the tired eyes dazzled by pomp of finery and the unreality of bridal garments might grow rested by the calm of summer seas and evening shadows.

It was a proof of his unselfishness that he never spoke of his own exceeding happiness, or reminded her by look or word that this was the last evening that she would be Rotha Maturin. Now and then he spoke to her, but only of the scene that laid before them, till he was rewarded by seeing the ruffled brow grow calm again, and the old colour come back to the weary face.

"Dear Rotha, they ought not to have let you tire yourself like this. I shall take better care of you than that."

"They could not help it, Robert; there was so much to do, and Mr. Tracy came so late. I don't mind now. I am getting rested, I always do with you," and Rotha leant gratefully on the strong arm that loved to support her.

Presently of her own accord she asked him if they should walk towards the churchyard, as service was over and it would be quite quiet now. Robert answered that it was just what he wished; but that he had feared to tire her by proposing it; and then they slowly retraced their steps.

They stood for a long time silently by the marble cross; till Robert saw the tears in Rotha's eyes, and questioned her gently.

"I ought not to have brought you here to-night, my darling."

"Why not, Robert? It is so quiet and beautiful up here; and see how the soft wind sweeps over the grass as she said. Robert, I can't help thinking of Gar to-night."

"Oh, Rotha!" he drew her towards him sorely troubled, almost jealously; "not of Gar to-night surely, darling."

"Happily—only happily. Nay, Robert, you never thought that. I was so wishing he could see us to-night. I think he would be so glad, Robert."

" My darling, why should we doubt it ? surely the knowledge of our happiness, if they know it, will be as precious as ever to their sainted souls. But, Rotha, I am only a poor earthly lover, and earthly love is prone to jealousy and doubt. Tell me, dearest, if at this moment one shadow of regret for the past, one fear for the future, is in your heart to-night : for as surely as we have crossed over two graves to each other, I believe that God intended each for each and none other."

Rotha looked up in his face a little moved by his passion.

" Do you mean if I regret Gar still, Robert ?"

He made an affirmative motion, but did not trust himself to speak.

She stole her hand in his. " What do you think, Robert ?"

" My darling, it is for you to answer and not I."

It was nearly dark now, and she took up the hand she held and kissed it, as though that were the fittest expression of her love ; but closing her suddenly in his arms he prayed her to tell him.

" Oh, Robert, to think you need my words still. Do you know, Gar once told me that I had not given him all that was in me to give, and now I feel he was right."

" What then, sweet love ?"

"I have given it all now!" And then, speaking with her face hidden, "God has taken Gar, and for a long time I was inconsolable, now I know it was for the best; for if he had lived I should have loved him well, no doubt, but not as I shall love you. Robert, don't you know—don't you feel—that I love you the best of all?" And as he pressed her to his heart, the anguish of that doubt died away out of Robert Ord's heart for ever.

THE END.

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